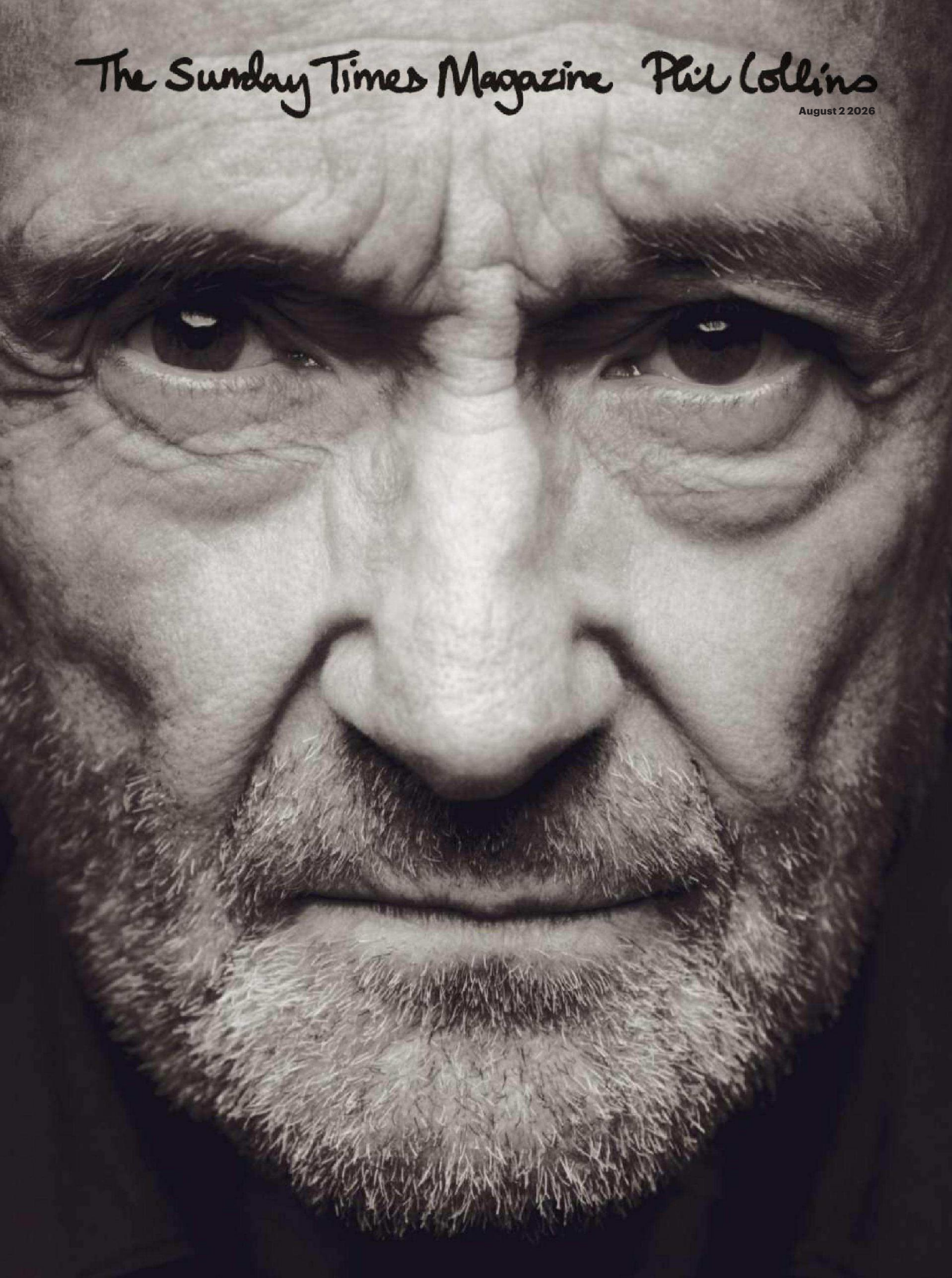
The Sunday Times Magazine

Phil Collins

August 2 2026



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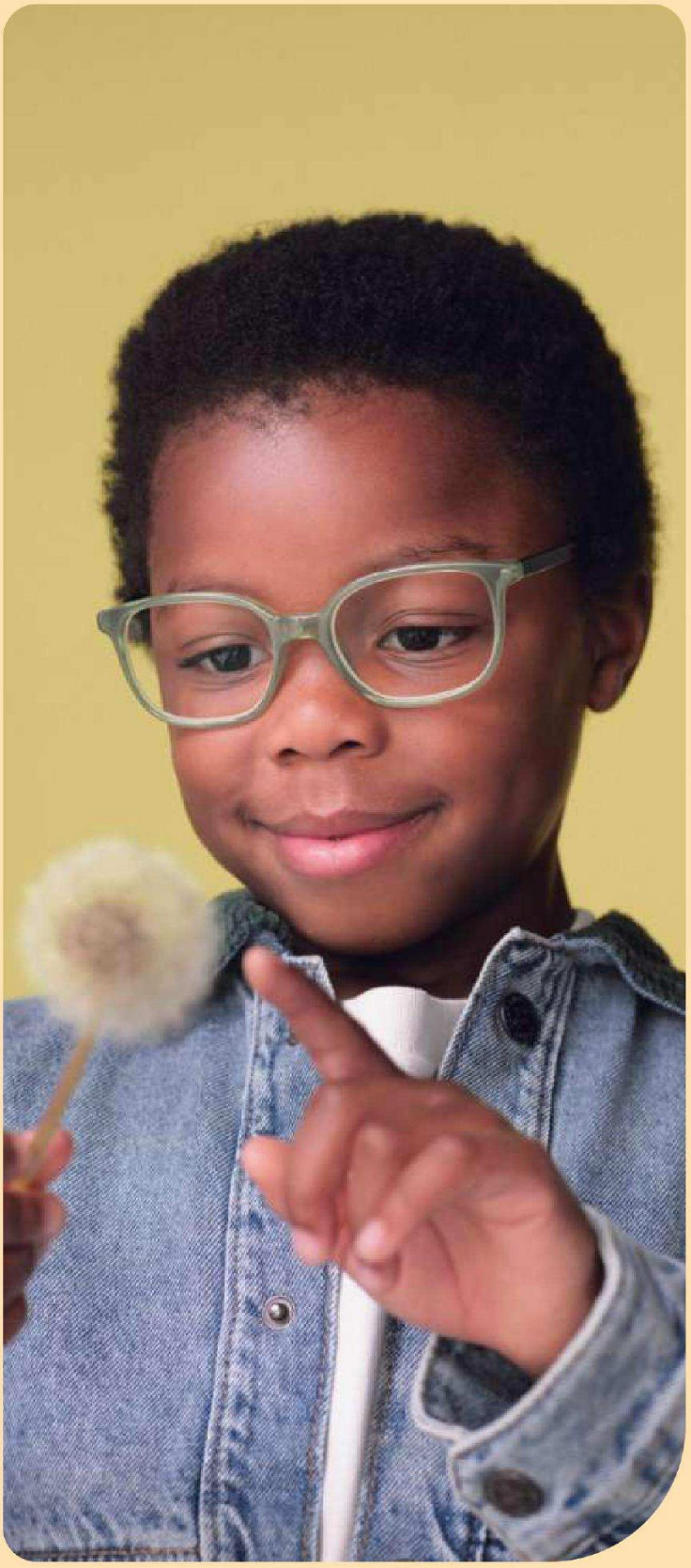

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THE SUNDAY TIMES *magazine*

BUNTING HIGH AND LOW
By Martin Parr, c1997
A lady relaxes in the sunshine at a fair in Sedlescombe, a village near Battle in East Sussex. The photograph first appeared in Parr's book *Think of England*, published in 2000.

02.08.2026

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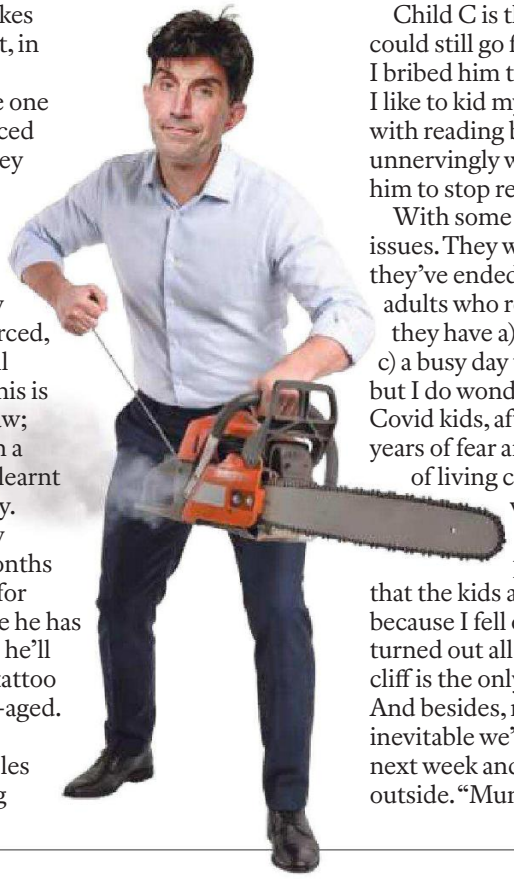
MATT RUDD

Why won't my kids misspend their youth like I did?

Years ago, friends went on holiday and left their 17-year-old daughter home alone with the cat. When they returned, she was waiting for them on the stairs leading up to the front door. "Mum, Dad," she said solemnly, "I just want to thank you both for always letting me learn from my mistakes." She had had a party in their absence. The party had been announced on Facebook. Some of the party's less upstanding attendees — friends of friends of Facebook friends — had discovered her father's toolshed and, within it, his well-maintained chainsaw. They had used it to cut through enough joists in the basement to require significant structural repairs. Any more and they would have brought the house down. For the rest of the week the daughter had been practising her lines. There were mistakes and she had definitely learnt from them. The cat, in case you are worried, was fine.

I remembered this terrifying story every time one of my children turned into a teenager. I was braced for variations on a chainsaw. And, for a while, they didn't disappoint. There was the first brush with cider in the local park. There was the dad ambulance summoned in the small hours to a festival in Cornwall. Not Reading. Not Leeds. Cornwall! There were parties where a beer-only rule was implemented but not sufficiently enforced, despite the airport-style security scanners. I still don't know how they got all that vodka in. But this is what's supposed to happen. You lay down the law; they test the boundaries. Someone throws up in a piano. And, very slowly, very surely, lessons are learnt on the long road to adulthood and responsibility.

Except something has gone awry. Technically Child A stopped being a teenager only three months ago but there haven't been any lessons to learn for much longer than that. I'm not naive — I'm sure he has stories I don't want to hear and it's still possible he'll come back from a weekend in Ibiza with a face tattoo — but increasingly he behaves as if he's middle-aged. He works hard. He's in a serious relationship. Faced with the choice between a night on the tiles and a night in, they pick the latter with alarming regularity. He does meal plans not for the next couple of days but for a fortnight. He's a student, of course, so it's all about budgeting… but also he's a student! That level of organisation is baffling. Last week he gave me a lift back from the pub. It was no problem, he said. He was at the gym anyway. I'm Eddie, he's Saffy and I'm not at all sure this is absolutely fabulous.



Child B has read one too many stories about AI eating all the jobs and three too many about most degrees not being worth the debt, so he just studies and studies and studies. Last weekend he had a small party to celebrate the end of his penultimate school year. He and his well-behaved friends drank in moderation, went to bed at a sensible hour and decided to go for a country walk in the morning. It is, after all, the best part of the day.

Child C is the newest teenager in the family and could still go full werewolf, except, three years ago, I bribed him to read every night and he's still doing it. I like to kid myself that he's simply fallen in love with reading but the truth is he's just extremely, unnervingly well behaved. I might have to bribe him to stop reading and sneak out to a party.

With some exceptions, other parents report similar issues. They were braced for Kevin the Teenager and they've ended up with fully formed, fully sensible adults who refuse to test the boundaries because they have a) homework, b) chess club and/or c) a busy day tomorrow. It's much easier this way but I do wonder why it's happening — these are the Covid kids, after all. What price those formative years of fear and isolation? Is this never-ending cost of living crisis permeating the carefree joie de vivre of adolescence?

You're right — first-world parenting problems. Why on earth would I worry that the kids are not misspending their youth? Just because I fell off a cliff after a toga party in Corfu and turned out all right, it doesn't mean that falling off a cliff is the only way to go. Maybe their way is better. And besides, now that I've written this, it's almost inevitable we'll come back from our kid-free holiday next week and find one of them waiting on the steps outside. "Mum, Dad, I just want to say…" ■

CHARLIE CLIFT

GOOD NEWS!

Global hunger has declined for the third year running. In 2025 the United Nations estimated that it affected 645 million people, 14 million fewer than in 2024. This was measured by the prevalence of severe food insecurity and malnourishment. The biggest improvements have been in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, driven by a combination of agricultural productivity and welfare schemes ■ **By Yasmin Choudhury**

RELATIVE VALUES

Edward and Tom Stourton

The broadcaster, who died from prostate cancer last month, and his son, an actor

Edward

Tom is a lovely boy, he really is — though, at 39, he's too old to be called a boy, I suppose. My earliest memories of him are watching him appear in Georgetown University Hospital in Washington DC; I was based in Washington for Channel 4 at the time. The doctor delivering him almost dropped him at one point.

Tom has both American and British citizenship as a result. My family was born all over the place: me in Nigeria, my father in Mauritius, my mother in Hong Kong. I remember phoning my father to tell him of Tom's birth and he told me to go to the embassy quick and put him in for a passport. The dual citizenship has done him quite well; he's off to New York soon, filming.

I have two older children, Ivo and Eleanor, from my first marriage — to Tom's mother, Margaret — and a younger stepdaughter, Rosie, from my second — to Fiona. Ivo and Eleanor were born in Wimbledon, but Washington was my first permanent overseas posting. We were there for three years, and then Paris for one, and then we returned to London.

I was very busy during Tom's early years. I'd come back to London to be diplomatic editor of ITN, and that was an intense period: the end of the Cold War, the Maastricht negotiations, quite a lot of wars going on. I covered the First Gulf War, then was in Baghdad and then Sarajevo. It was a stressful time, but I wouldn't have been without it because it was incredibly engaging and exciting as well. I'm quite proud of the fact that I never missed a Christmas. A few birthdays, perhaps, but never Christmas.

We sent Tom to boarding school, I suppose because we had gone to boarding schools. I had a good time at Ampleforth and I didn't learn about the shocking stories of abuse there until long after I'd left. [In 2018 it was reported that abuse had been inflicted on pupils by monks at Ampleforth for more than 40 years.] Ampleforth was in the middle of nowhere, the North York Moors, whereas Tom's school — Farleigh, in Hampshire — was much closer to home. We used to have this little ritual on Sunday nights for the drive back, and stop en route at a Little Chef on the A303. Later on Tom went to Eton. He seems very happy and well balanced, so I hope he was OK there.

After he left Bristol University he went immediately into acting. I remember asking him about news of his degree — he'd studied history of art — and he said he hadn't bothered to find out the results! But then he was so focused on what he wanted to do, which was comedy and television. He's worked incredibly hard to make it a reality, and you really cannot ask for more than that. It's essential that children work out what they want to do themselves. The worst thing that can happen is that they wake up in 15 years to say they hate their careers. I don't think that will happen to Tom.

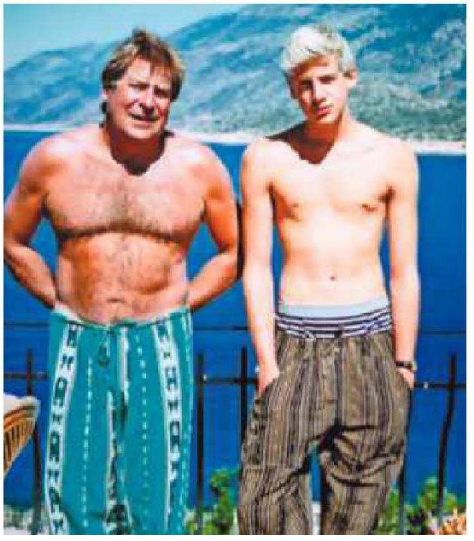
I really enjoy his comedy. Early on he had a YouTube series called *High Renaissance Man*. It was very funny. I loved his 2021 film, too, *All My Friends Hate Me*. Tom is very funny company too. We both live in London and he comes to visit a lot. If he does bring a girlfriend along we always love meeting them, but we never interfere. As long as your children are happy and balanced, then you don't have to worry.

I've had stage 4 prostate cancer for more than ten years now. It's serious stuff. It can be managed but not cured. All my children have been wonderful, so full of empathy and sympathy. I love it when we get together for lunch, where we share a wide range of opinions. There's always a lot of noise, but such good humour.

Tom

As the youngest of three I've always been told I give off big "younger sibling" energy, even now at the age of 39. My older brother is a writer and my sister fundraises for an animal charity — I'm the only one who's gone into the arts and does something totally nonsensical in terms of trying to maintain a stable income.

After Tom left university I asked him about his degree and he said he hadn't bothered to find out the result



Main: Tom, 39, and Edward, 68, at Edward's house in London last year. Right: father and son on a family holiday

PORTRAIT BY ANNA BATCHELOR

As a child I only saw my parents at the weekend. I didn't mind boarding school, though I didn't really enjoy the going-to-church aspect of it. I think my earliest memories of my father are watching him present the *One O'Clock News* on the BBC. I'd be sitting down to lunch, switch on the television and go, "Oh look, there's Dad." I liked the sound of his voice.

He was very busy when I was young, but he always made sure to take us on a lot of fun family holidays. Wherever we went, we had to go and see the churches. His relationship with Catholicism has changed over the years — he has become increasingly agnostic, like me — but back then, so many churches!

I think I always saw him as very serious. But then how could I not? He presented the news and then did the *Today* programme on Radio 4. My teachers were very impressed — they thought it a terrible injustice, outrageous even, when he was taken off the programme in 2009. But at home he always had a great sense of humour. On car journeys we would listen to Fry and Laurie, Monty Python. I've always enjoyed Dad's capacity for silliness; he appreciates a good fart joke.

Sadly my parents divorced when I was 13. I lived with my mum, so my relationship with him only properly deepened when I was in my mid-twenties, after I went to live with him. I thought I might spend a year there, but it ended up being almost four. It was lovely.

He knew I was never likely to follow in his footsteps — I was never interested enough in current affairs and he knew I loved comedy. I'd always been prone to showing off. There are photos of me as a child putting on clothes and standing there waiting for people to find it hilarious. Dad has always been very encouraging.

When I first started out with those sketches on YouTube there were comments underneath saying, "Ed Stourton's son, nepotism!" That was frustrating because the comedy world is not remotely interested in whether or not your father happens to be a journalist. There are no connections there waiting to be exploited.

Dad has been living with cancer for years now. There have been scary times but he faces it so well, with such stoicism. He's made of stern stuff, Dad. Unlike me — if I stub my toe, people know about it for a week.

We have lots of family Sunday lunches together. I love it when my siblings and I get a riff going and Dad is sitting there laughing, his shoulders shaking ■

Interviews by Nick Duerden.

***Made in America: The Dark History That Led to Donald Trump* by Edward Stourton (Torva £20) is out now. Order at timesbookshop.co.uk**

STRANGE HABITS

Edward on Tom
He is a constant watcher — sometimes with a sketchbook. His drawing of my father in his great old age was wonderfully evocative

Tom on Edward
Wherever possible he likes to wear a sarong. The moment the sun comes out it's clothes off, sarong on

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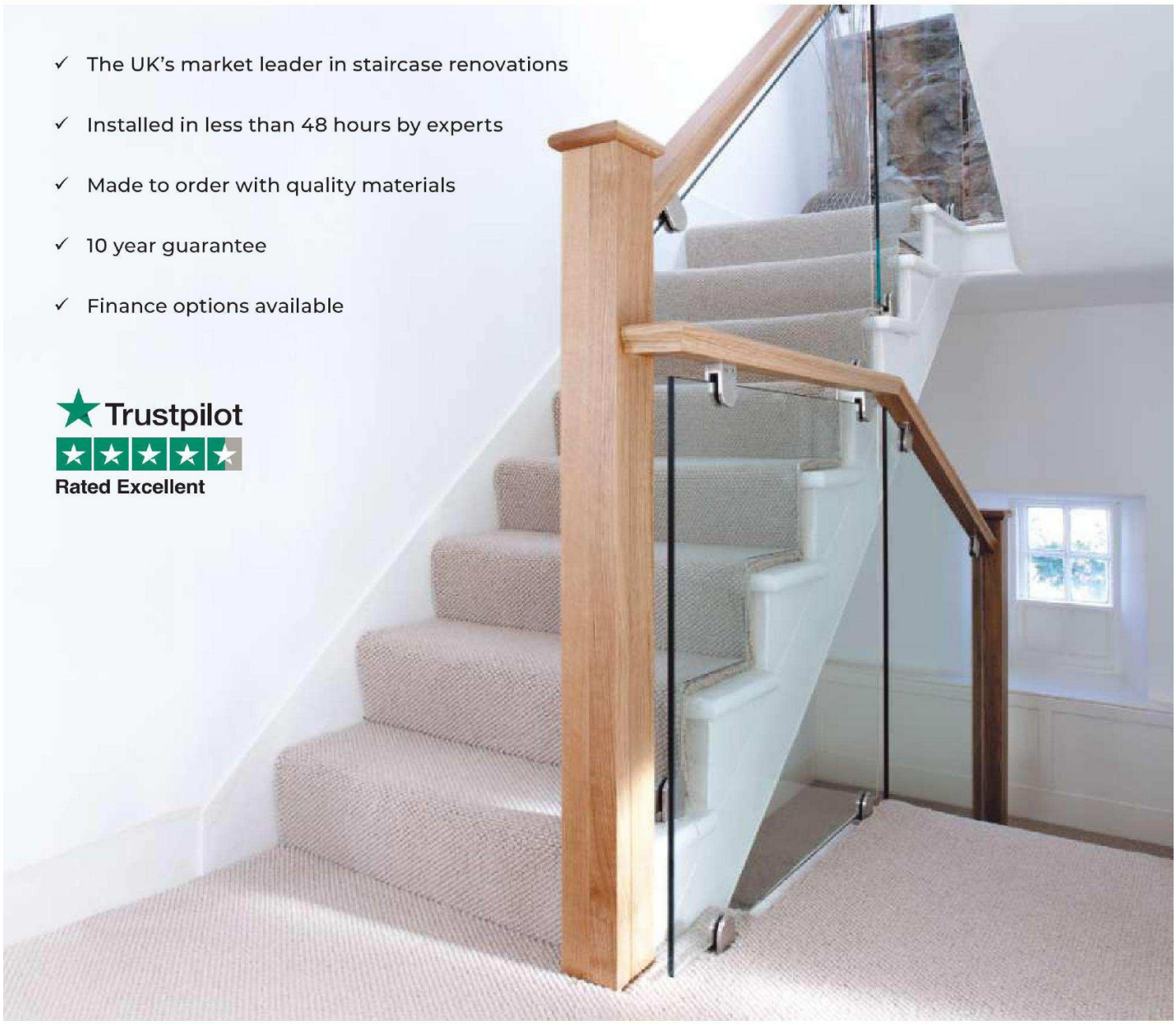
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THAT'S MY JOB

I think Boris Johnson lives on my route

Cherie Iyidor-Jones, 26, refuse loader

yidor-Jones is based at Biffa's Culham depot, in Abingdon, Oxfordshire. She was a manager at McDonald's before changing jobs in 2023.

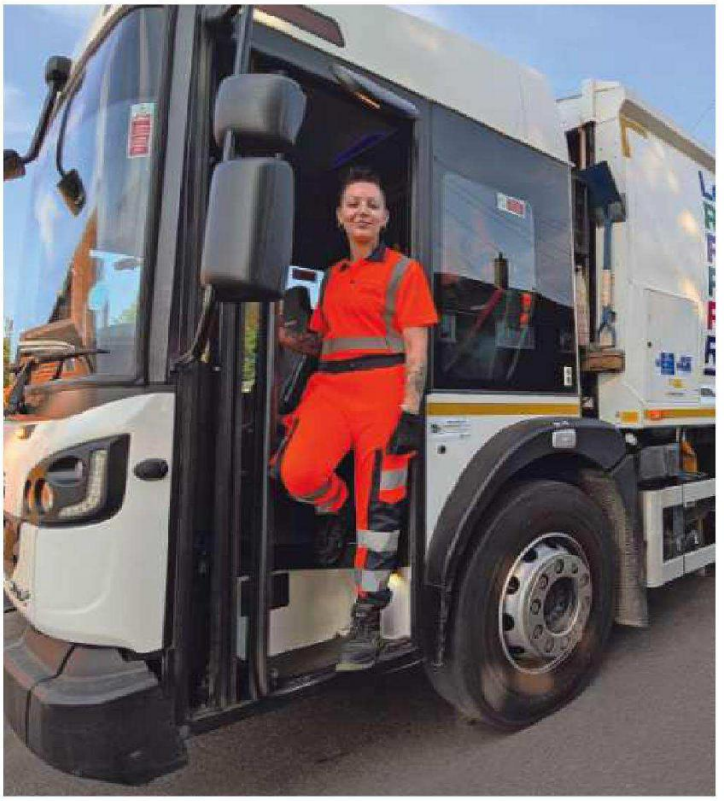
I've never, ever been called a refuse loader — I'm just known as the bin lady. People always assume it's smelly. The usual question is: "You're mad, why would you want a job like that?" It stinks at first but now I'm nose blind — a few hours working behind the lorry and I was immune.

Even during the heatwave I didn't notice the smell. Sometimes a bunch of kids come out to tease us, holding their noses, but at least I'm outdoors: the wind blows most of the stench away. A wheelie bin of smelly nappies is probably the worst, but even that's bearable.

I didn't plan to be a bin lady. Then, one morning, a refuse team dropped into my McDonald's restaurant for coffee. We talked and they suggested I apply. I wanted a change of scenery, so when a job came up I put my name down. My boyfriend does the same work but just got an HGV licence, so soon he will drive a rubbish lorry instead.

There are about 215 frontline staff at Biffa's depot near Oxford and maybe six or seven are female. I suppose it's not the obvious choice of work for a woman. I ached for the first few weeks. Now I'm much stronger. At least I don't have to pay to join a gym. I get enough exercise on the rounds.

I start at 5.45am and work an eight-hour shift. During the heatwave we came in to the depot earlier when it was cooler, but we weren't able to begin a round until 6am. It's a noisy job and people complain if we wake them up.



COURTESY OF BIFFA

I do draw the line at home, though. My boyfriend always takes the bins out

My team does the same route every week, including Sonning Common, Garsington and Berinsfield, so we get to know our patch and the residents. There are three of us — one driver, two loaders. In the old days, men had to carry metal bins on their shoulders and tip the rubbish in manually. Now a pair of hydraulic lifters are fitted on the back of the lorry, making life a lot easier. I can pull two wheelie bins across the pavement, push them into the lift arms, press a button and let the lorry do the rest. I don't even open the lids, everything is automatic.

Sometimes we accidentally lose a bin in the crusher, then I have to tell the resident and a new one is delivered. It's too dangerous to reach in and try to retrieve the one that's gone in.

Our vehicle weighs about 15 tonnes empty. The compacter then crushes the entire contents of a wheelie bin down to roughly the size of a football. We can carry an average of 1,300 bins a day, which takes the maximum load up to 26 tonnes.

The bank holiday weekends are the worst for waste. People party and barbecue, which means more stuff is thrown out. My area is quite posh, so we see lots of champagne and wine bottles on our recycling round, which is carried out on a different day. I think Boris Johnson lives in one house.

I'm provided with proper clothing to make sure I stay safe. Even my gloves can cope with broken glass. Steel-capped boots are essential when manhandling a wheelie bin. A full one could easily break a toe. Hi-vis clothing is also important, especially in the winter months, as well as suncream in the summer.

Motorists are usually quite understanding about the lorry stopping all the time, although some mount the pavement to squeeze past in the narrower lanes. If everybody could be just a little more patient we'd get out of the way even faster.

Lunch is usually in the cab — we know the best lay-bys to stop and enjoy a view. Our residents are absolutely lovely. One brought out a platter with three ice-cold drinks during the heatwave, another leaves me a packet of crisps on the gate every week. People often give us a good Christmas tip.

Sometimes we are first on the scene when something bad has happened. One morning I heard a lady on a farm shouting for help from a field. A horse had kicked out and shattered her knee, so I trudged through the mud and carried her out. She was in quite a bad way.

Being a bin lady isn't for everyone but I really enjoy my job. I do draw the line at home, though. My boyfriend always takes the bins out ■

Interview by Jeremy Taylor

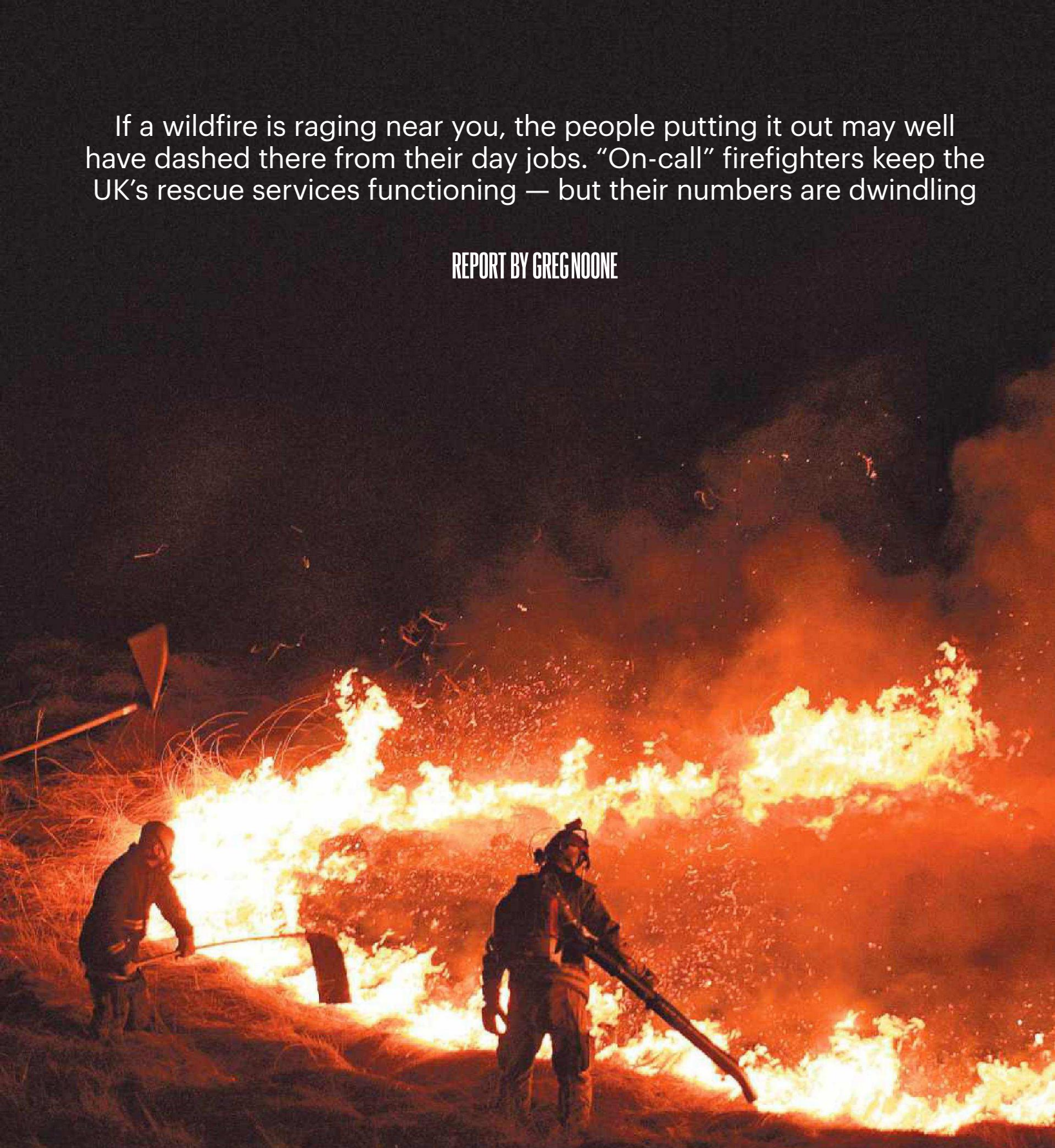
Average pay Salaries vary by region, but £12.92-£13.84 an hour, according to Biffa

The on-call firefighter Yasmin Di Carluccio at Hardley fire station in Hampshire. Right: a wildfire on Marsden Moor, West Yorkshire, in 2021

Blazing

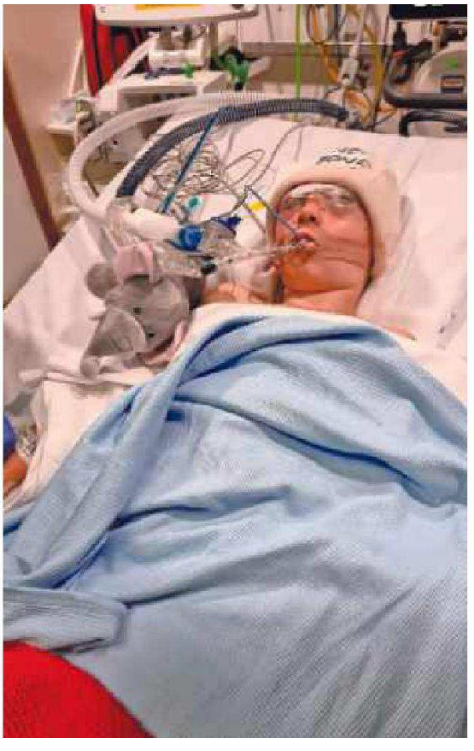
If a wildfire is raging near you, the people putting it out may well have dashed there from their day jobs. “On-call” firefighters keep the UK’s rescue services functioning — but their numbers are dwindling

REPORT BY GREG NOONE



squad

It is painful for Carla Lambert to recall the night of October 29, 2022.



Carla Lambert and her daughter, Lila-Claire, who was left with a broken skull after a car crash in 2022. Then six, Lila-Claire spent nine months in hospital

She remembers it as very dark and very cold; that she and her family were travelling home from Tesco in Dorchester with microwave curries and colouring books for a quiet night in front of the telly; that the tarmac was slick with fresh rain; that their Ford Focus suddenly skidded across the three-lane A37 and hit a tree before being hit by another vehicle and sent spinning, like "a waltz that had gone wrong". When the world came to a stop, she realised her six-year-old daughter, Lila-Claire, was dying on the back seat.

It took only 11 minutes for a four-man fire and rescue crew from Maiden Newton, five and a half miles away, to arrive at the scene. Visibility was poor, the air acrid with petrol and battery acid. When they arrived, several motorists had already pulled over to help Lambert, now 39, and her family, many in Halloween costumes. One woman dressed as a pumpkin kept five-year-old Charlie Lambert distracted while others attempted to revive his sister. Two firefighters used their defibrillator on Lila-Claire and administered oxygen therapy through an adult whole-face mask, such was the extent of her head injury. Their colleagues set about felling nearby hedges to create a path for the incoming air ambulance crew. Portable lamps carried by another fire engine lit the way as they carried Lila-Claire back to the helicopter on a stretcher.

This scene of quiet professionalism in the face of horror is in keeping with the public perception of how firefighters work. What would probably surprise most people is that the crew who saved Lila-Claire's life were not full-time firefighters. By day one worked in a factory, another as a helicopter engineer.

Commonly known as "on-call" or "retained" firefighters, these are people who usually spend their shifts at home or at work doing the day job, but with an emergency pager on their belt, ready to drop everything and make the few minutes' drive or sprint to their station. They represent 36 per cent of the UK's 44,963 firefighters and form at least part of the workforce at 978 fire stations in England — 70 per cent of the total number. Of these, 737 are operated entirely by on-call staff. Many are isolated, rural stations.

London and West Midlands are the only fire services staffed entirely by full-time firefighters. Without on-call firefighters, the rest of the country's fire services would be in trouble. With the agreement of their main employers, most are contracted to be available for callouts between 80 and 120 hours a week. For this they are paid a pittance. According to a recent survey by the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), an on-call firefighter committed to 90 hours' coverage a week receives an annual retainer fee of £3,700 — equivalent to ten per cent of the pay of a full-time firefighter and working out at less than 80p an hour. This is topped up by a "disturbance fee" of £5 and an average hourly rate of £17.75 during a callout, for which a fully qualified on-call firefighter is typically paid £42.16 per emergency. The NFCC estimates fire services save more than £1 billion a year by employing them instead of more full-timers.

So on-call firefighters are a bargain — but they are in decline. As of March 2024, 7,967 on-call firefighters were serving in England — a drop of 26 per cent since 2014 (the number of full-timers fell by 13 per cent). That has meant fewer people running remote rural stations, which compromises their availability to attend emergencies and has made them easy prey for budget cuts: between 2010 and 2024, 36 on-call fire stations were shut.

Top: John Donnelly, an IT technician who also works at Hardley fire station. Above: the station's training tower

PREVIOUS PAGES: GARETH IWAN JONES FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE, AFP
THESE PAGES: COURTESY OF CARLA LAMBERT, GARETH IWAN JONES FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

Most on-callers are contracted to be available for between 80 and 120 hours a week. Their retainer fee works out at about 80p an hour

In February this year a last-minute funding agreement between fire services and Whitehall saved some of the remaining 737 on-call stations from closure, but others remain under threat, including four in Kent, two in Buckinghamshire and four each in Wiltshire and Dorset — including Maiden Newton.

This comes at a time when the UK's rural stations are dealing with more floods and wildfires than ever before. This year's heatwaves have created a "firewave" of blazes across the country; in the first two weeks of July Derbyshire Fire and Rescue Service attended 128 outdoor fires — up 83 per cent on the 70 fires that were the average in the past three years. This included a huge moor fire above the village of Tintwistle in the Peak District; on-call firefighters were among those called in to tackle this and other wildfires this summer in Devon, Durham, Hampshire and Conwy.

Whether it's wildfires or road traffic accidents, the presence of nearby on-call firefighters can mean the difference between life and death. "Accidents happen on the A37 all the time," says Carla Lambert. Maiden Newton responded to 68 incidents last year, and Lambert is clear that she wants it to stay open. "I want anyone else on that road who happens to have an accident — because more people will — to have the same chance as Lila did to get help, fast."

John Donnelly adores his job. Tall, muscled and bald, he is an on-call firefighter in Hardley, a suburb near Southampton, Hampshire. A Middlesbrough lad down south and a 55-year-old father of two, the IT technician joined Hampshire and Isle of Wight Fire and Rescue Service in June ➤

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2019, when he was 48. Donnelly initially tried joining the fire service aged 19 as a "wholetimer" — a full-time firefighter based at a station, with fixed shifts.

"It was the right thing not to take me on then," he says, recognising he was too immature. By his late forties he was not only older but also wiser and eager for a change after putting some serious health problems behind him. His only regret about becoming an on-call firefighter, he says, "is that I didn't do it sooner".

An on-call station, Hardley deals with callouts, or "shouts", that run the gamut. There are still plenty of house fires and road traffic collisions, both less likely to be lethal these days thanks to smoke alarms and seatbelts. Then there are the water rescues (usually gung-ho motorists at fords), automatic fire alarms ("polo shirt calls", as Donnelly puts it, because they usually involve a man from the alarm company insisting he only put the thing in test mode), property break-ins for the ambulance service, and ring-cutting. These are usually wedding bands stuck on swollen fingers, but once, at A&E, doctors needed help cutting through a penis ring.

And now there are the wildfires. These blazes can catch new recruits out, Donnelly says. Hardley's patch covers a large part of the New Forest, where hundreds of gorse fires are started every year by careless campers (and some by arsonists, including one who laughed at Donnelly's crew from a nearby treeline). So far this year Hardley's on-call crew has responded to about forty of these "fires in the open".

Firefighters tackling wildfires in the hot summer months commonly shed their flame-retardant outer jackets to prevent overheating, making them more vulnerable when a fire catches suddenly on a patch of gorse. Donnelly remembers this happening last year, when his crew were at the bottom of a shallow valley. "In just three seconds it climbed 20 metres," he says, recalling flames rushing up the sides with a great ➤

Left: an evening fire drill at Hardley. Top: floods in Datchet, Berkshire, 2014; a wildfire in Tintwistle, Derbyshire, last month

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Only 8.3 per cent of on-call firefighters are women. "I still have to pass the same tests as the men. I'm just a bit shorter"

whoosh. "If you get caught in that in your T-shirt, you're in bother."

Among Donnelly's colleagues are a nightclub owner, a bank employee and an engineer who works evenings and weekends. With a remote job in IT and a home minutes from his station, Donnelly refers to himself as a "golden unicorn": an on-call firefighter who can provide a maximum of 160 hours of weekly cover. What unites the crew, he says, aside from a fondness for cake, is their sense of service and camaraderie. Even on tricky shouts senior officers treat subordinates like equals. "There's no empire-building when it comes to incidents," he says.

Yasmin Di Carluccio has been an on-call firefighter in Hampshire for three years. She now plans to become a "wholetimer"

Until the 17th century most organised firefighting in the British countryside was the preserve of loosely co-ordinated teams of able-bodied men in market towns or employees of landed estates, called to emergencies by the clang of an alarm bell and invariably paid in small beer. These groups were slowly professionalised from the 17th century onwards, after the Great Fire of London in 1666 triggered the creation of semi-professional brigades, often run by insurance companies. While full-time brigades were established in the capital and other large cities in the 19th century, the countryside model of community-minded part-timers manning stations in towns and villages persisted.

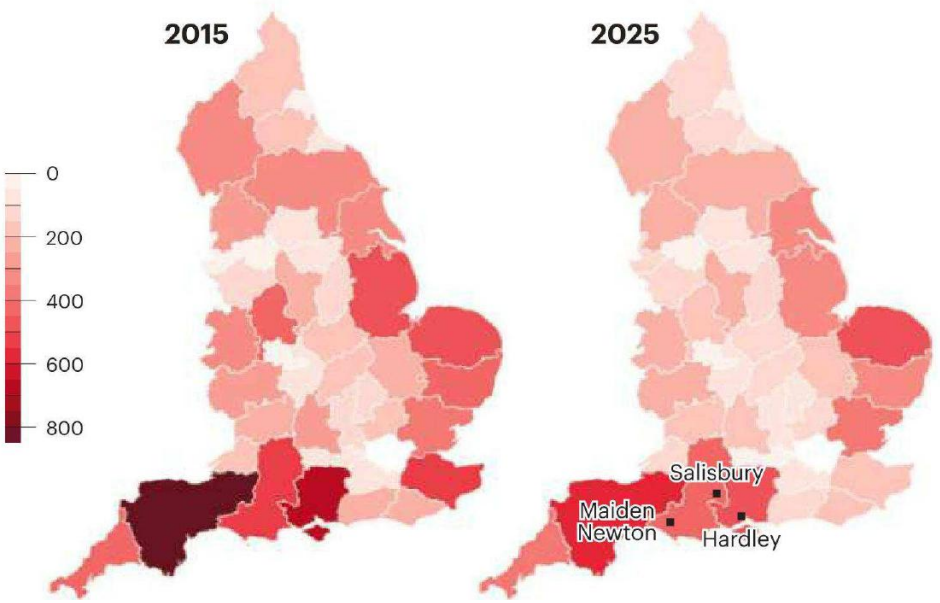
Yasmin Di Carluccio has been an on-call firefighter since 2023. She's attached to both Hardley station, to which she can sprint from her work as a biscuit designer on a nearby industrial estate, and another a couple of miles away in Hythe, within reach of her home. She says that while female firefighters remain a rarity — 8.3 per cent of all on-call firefighters are women, compared with 10 per cent of wholetimers — she's not treated any differently by her colleagues. "I still have to pass the same tests they have to pass," she says. "I'm just a bit shorter."

We meet during Hardley's Monday drill night. Di Carluccio, 30, puts on her kit — fireproof overalls, breathing apparatus and an oxygen tank. Tonight's team task is to rescue a "casualty" (a weighted dummy) from the station's smoke-filled training tower. A few paces into the building, everything is pitch black. Di Carluccio will need to demonstrate her ability to feel her way along the walls, sticking always to the right so she won't get lost. She must proceed slowly but with purpose, patting the floors, beds and furniture with the back of her hand to lessen the risk of injury from sharp objects or broken plug sockets.

It's claustrophobic and sweaty, but typical of the training most on-call ➤

On-callers in decline

Number of on-call firefighters serving England's fire service areas



GARETH IWAN JONES FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

firefighters undergo every week as part of their contracted hours, so they're as up to date as their wholetime peers.

Most new starters realise the job requires them to remain in peak physical condition, says Charly Melia, in charge of recruitment and retention for North Yorkshire's fire service, but some are wholly unprepared for how intense the role can get. Of those on-callers who left fire services in England last year, 65 per cent resigned; only 14 per cent retired. "Some recruits can't commit to even turning up for some of the training sessions," Melia says. "I think people really underestimate the commitment and how tiring it can be."

If only more people knew how exciting working as an on-call firefighter is, Donnelly says. The service is "desperate to put people in stations, but if people don't put their hand up you can't do it".

No closures are planned in Hampshire, but eight of its on-call firefighters are employed as recruitment advocates to persuade more people to join their ranks. Neighbouring Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service, however, may have to shut several on-call stations to fulfil its legal requirement to balance its budget.

It's a bright March day when I meet Andy Cole at Salisbury fire station, which has wholetime and on-call firefighters. Dorset and Wiltshire's chief fire officer is softly spoken and grey-haired. One senses he'd be more at ease as the calm and level-headed incident commander in one of the musty, scuffed kits downstairs than rationalising the one decision he never joined the fire service to make.

"I don't want to close any fire stations — but I have to save money," Cole tells me. The only way he can plug a £1.7 million deficit over the next three years, he says, is by cutting frontline stations.

While Scotland and Northern Ireland have national fire services, those in England and Wales are almost completely decentralised. Most cover areas that match county borders, with fire authority committees made up of local councillors and commissioners overseeing budgets and performance. Central government sets broad policy in England via the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, where Angela Rayner has just replaced Steve Reed as secretary of state. But its influence on fire services is felt more keenly in the annual grants from the Treasury, which fire services then supplement with a percentage or "precept" taken from council taxes.

Alice Elliott, 25, a social media manager and the organiser of a "Save Our Fire Stations" campaign, believes there are other savings to be made before vital frontline services are cut. Her father-in-law is an on-call firefighter at Maiden Newton. "You cannot cut on-call stations without detriment to people's lives," she says.

Cole and Elliott have both lobbied government and backbench MPs, and in June all eight stations that were facing closure in Dorset and Wiltshire were given a stay of execution. Their remaining open, however, is contingent on the fire authority being allowed to raise more council tax and

"Some recruits can't even commit to the training. I think people underestimate how tiring the job can be"

Left: Dorset and Wiltshire's chief fire officer, Andy Cole. Above: training exercises at Hay-on-Wye fire station

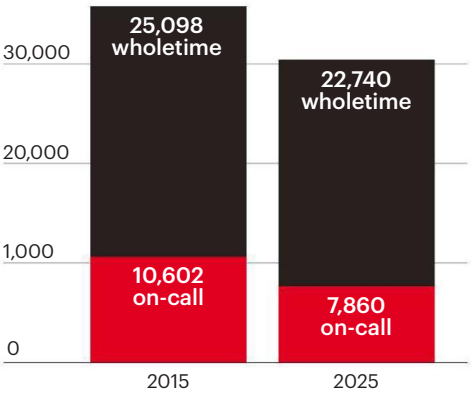
GARETH IWAN JONES FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE, FRANCESCA JONES FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

the government imposing no more funding cuts. That's a tall order, Elliott tells me after the ruling. "We've been granted a respite," she says. "Not a resolution."

Cole is also leader of the National Fire Chiefs Council's on-call strategic group and is not without sympathy for on-call firefighters — "every single minute of fire cover they provide is a sacrifice". The on-call system gave him his start in the fire service while he worked a day job in the ironmongers in Castle Cary, Somerset. "I'd grown up in the town so the crew were often people I knew," he says — workers from sawmills, farms and wholesalers.

But gone are the days when companies encouraged their workforce to pitch in at on-call stations. Without proper funding from local and national government, Cole says, "the on-call system fails".

Burning out?
Total number of on-call and wholetime firefighters in England



For the past three years Phil Morris has devoted most of his time and energy to proving that the on-call system doesn't have to fail. As the head of the on-call improvement programme at Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service, he has bucked the trend and managed to increase the pool of on-call firefighters his service can rely on. A 25-year veteran of the fire service, Morris, 47, is a short man with a stern face that disguises his boyish enthusiasm. We meet at Hay-on-Wye, an on-call station. So how did he achieve the great turnaround?

First, by making the existing on-call firefighters feel valued, he says. He spread the word of their selfless work with charity car washes, station open days, passing out parades and family appreciation days — far better for positive social media, he finds, than anything more official. Fire services should reintroduce themselves to the public, says Hay-on-Wye's watch manager, Jeremy Turner, 42: "All people see of fire stations are the trucks and the big red doors — they don't say much about what we do."

Crucially, Morris also upped the money. Out of additional funding of £1 million over three years, he found the cash to increase pay for training days and introduced bonuses. The salary is still an issue, says Ian Morgan, 55, a station liaison officer at Hay-on-Wye. He gives the example of an on-call father and son who own a garage 20 miles away in Crickhowell, Powys. "What does a mechanic charge these days, £40 an hour?" he asks. "As soon as the pager goes off they're on to £20 an hour." But no on-call firefighter has ever done the job for the money, Morgan says, sitting beneath sepia-tinted photos of former fire crews in Hay's mess room.

In Hardley, Di Carluccio has taken little convincing. She says nothing has ever really beaten the rush she feels speeding off to the next emergency, the fire engine's siren wailing. Soon, though, Hampshire may lose another on-call firefighter — because she's applying to become a wholetimer. The job has shown her that all she ever wanted to be was a firefighter: "I'll go until my body can't take it any more." ■

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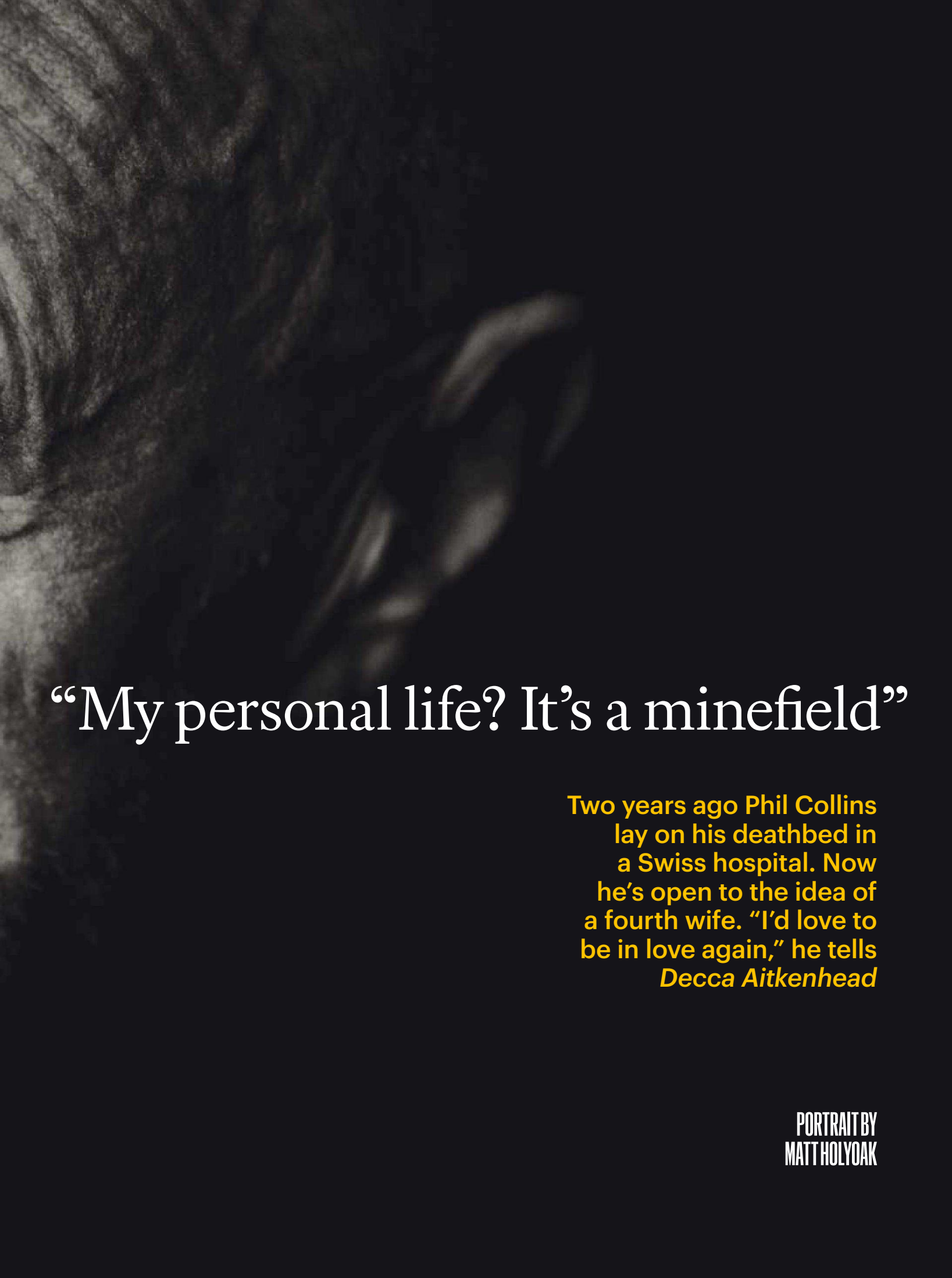
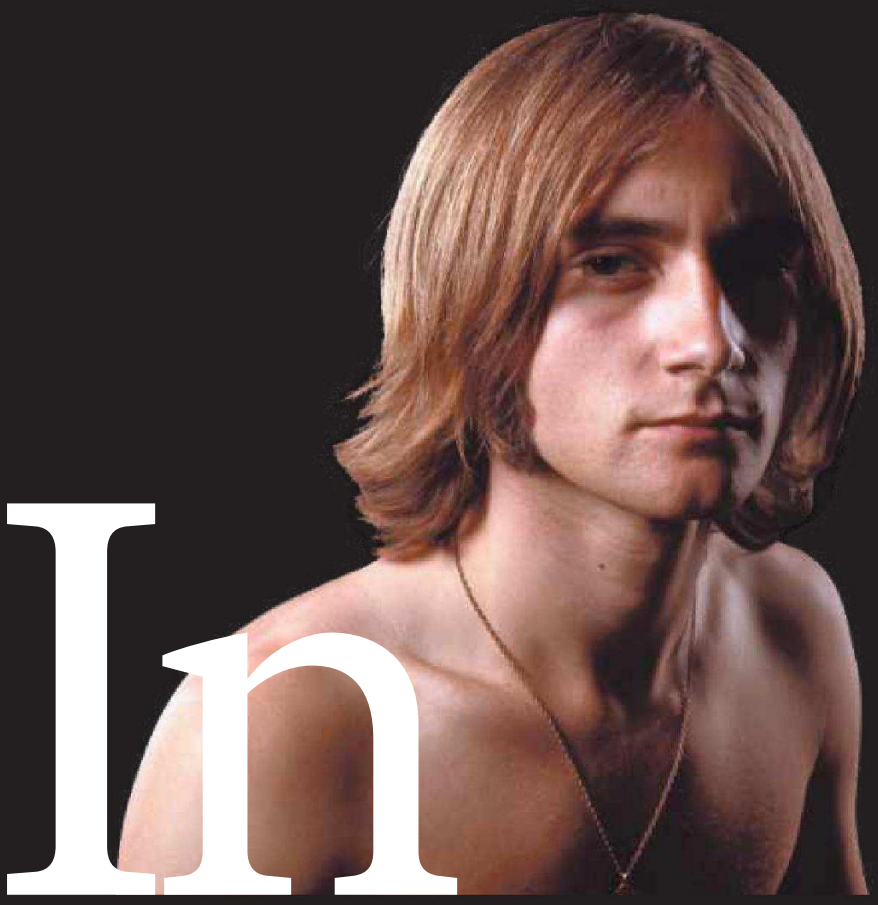


“My personal life? It’s a minefield”

Two years ago Phil Collins lay on his deathbed in a Swiss hospital. Now he’s open to the idea of a fourth wife. “I’d love to be in love again,” he tells *Decca Aitkenhead*

PORTRAIT BY
MATT HOLYOAK



In April 2024 Phil Collins lay unconscious in a Swiss hospital having drunk himself to within an inch of death. His manager of 50 years called his five children and summoned them to his bedside.

"Because there were some decisions to be made about 'Do we keep Phil on life support?' kind of thing. My kidneys were packing up, my organs were just seizing up. People were coming to say goodbye. But I don't remember them coming, I didn't have no idea this was going on. They were all worried that they wouldn't see me again. It could all have gone so terribly wrong."

As last year drew to a close, the family gathered again at the Mandarin Oriental in Knightsbridge. Collins hired a whole floor of the luxury London hotel to see in the new year together, and they spent four days and nights laughing and eating and talking and crying. His daughter Lily, the *Emily in Paris* actress, "was sitting beside me in tears, saying, 'I never thought I'd get these moments.' We had an incredible time. I can't overemphasise how fantastic it was."

We're talking on the sofa of his suite at the same hotel six months later. As he recalls the games they played — Pictionary, Scattergories — he smiles indulgently. "It got very competitive." Is he competitive? It's a perfectly innocent question, but in a flash the smile is gone.

"I'm not, actually. People would look at my career and automatically assume my ulterior motive was to be the biggest, the most popular, the most omnipresent possible. That was the furthest thing from my mind. Some people wanted to be a star in the spotlight, but that was never an ambition of mine. Having a hit record wasn't in my psyche at all."

Collins is one of only three artists to have sold more than 100 million records both as a soloist and band member. Since joining Genesis in 1970, the drummer turned singer has had ten No 1 albums, strings of hit singles and won eight Grammys, six Brits, two Golden Globes and an Oscar. His first solo album in 1981 made him a celebrity titan of the decade, the only performer to play both the UK and US Live Aid shows. He even starred in a hit movie, *Buster*, and appeared in *Miami Vice*. Everyone from Queen to the Queen adored Collins.

Then everyone decided to hate him. He continued to sell records and fill stadiums for another two decades, but after the 1980s he became a joke. "You don't have to be great to be successful," Noel Gallagher famously sneered. "Just look at Phil Collins." The world laughed about Patrick Bateman, the mass-murdering antihero of the 1990s novel *American Psycho*, being a fan. Music critics mocked his ballads as Taxi Driver FM; the tabloids savaged him for leaving his second wife in 1994 for a third one half his age.

By the time he announced his retirement in 2011 (prematurely; there have since been two more world tours), the tide was turning again. Kanye West, Adele, Pharrell Williams and the 1975 all paid homage to his music, and his 2016 autobiography, *Not Dead Yet*, became a global bestseller. A New York Times headline that year asked "Does anybody still loathe Phil Collins?" With the possible exception of Gallagher, the answer today seems to be no.

"I was omnipresent, not bigheaded"

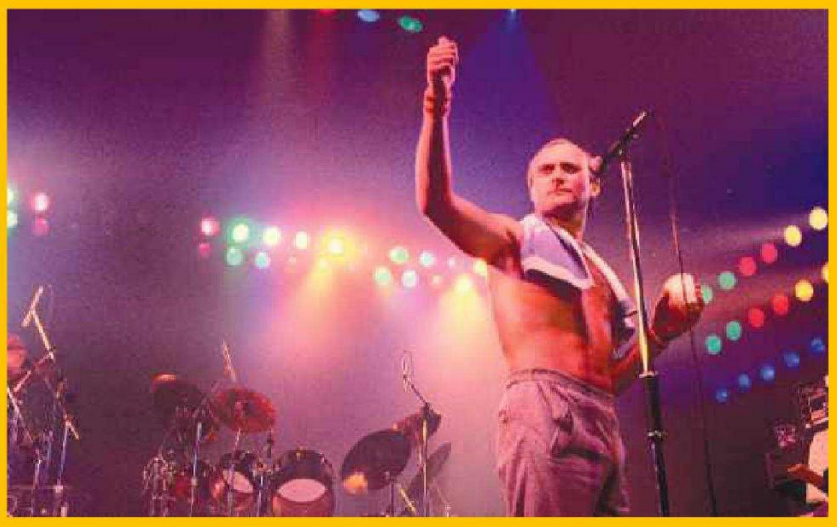
In the weeks before we meet, whenever I mention him, all I hear is, "Oh, I love Phil Collins!" Social media teems with reaction videos of wide-eyed Gen Zs hearing *In the Air Tonight* for the first time; later this year he'll be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In the court of public opinion Collins was acquitted of all charges many years ago.

And yet the 75-year-old I meet still feels he needs to clear his name. "To actually tell it the way it happened, as opposed to what has become myth or misinformation. I think everybody took me being omnipresent as being bigheadedness. And I really didn't mean to come over like that."

Today he comes across as unassuming and wry, by turns smiley and touchingly earnest, but physically meek. Following multiple spine and knee surgeries he can only walk on crutches; nerve damage has left him unable to hold a drumstick; and he has type 2 diabetes. A 24/7 live-in nurse has travelled from Switzerland with him, plus his assistant of 24 years, and his publicist is here too — but to my surprise all three disappear into the bedroom and leave us alone.

He has nothing to promote or sell, and as he says, "My personal life is a minefield," yet our allocated 90 minutes stretch to more than three hours. The conversation observes none of the

"MY KIDNEYS WERE PACKING UP, MY ORGANS WERE SEIZING UP. PEOPLE WERE COMING TO SAY GOODBYE BUT I DON'T REMEMBER THEM COMING"



Top: Collins drumming with Genesis in London, 1973. He became the singer in 1975. Middle: on stage in Munich, 1981. Above: at Heathrow in 1985 with his second wife, Jill, en route to the Philadelphia Live Aid show after performing at Wembley. Opposite: Collins in London, 1969

normal caution of an A-list interview; it's as if no one has told Collins he's famous. He talks about his ex-wives, his children, his alcoholism; about Paul McCartney, Steve Davis, Piers Morgan; about Faxgate; and about wanting to fall in love again. A 1997 biography described him as "unknowable", but Collins talks with the guileless emotional vulnerability of someone who longs to be understood.

I soon see why he had brought up the matter of his ambition within minutes of meeting. He returns to it time and again, drawn like a moth to the flame of a narrative he doesn't recognise. "Ambition suggests you do anything at any cost. And with three marriages behind me, it could be construed as, 'He didn't even stop and think twice because he was so ambitious.' That's the furthest thing from the truth."

The truth about "faxgate"

He was on tour with Genesis when the first marriage, to a childhood sweetheart, Andrea Bertorelli, started falling apart in 1976. By then the lead singer, Peter Gabriel, had left and been replaced by Collins. He was touring constantly, leaving Andrea home alone with their young son, Simon, and her daughter from a previous marriage, Joely, whom Collins had adopted. Feeling abandoned for the band, Andrea had an affair with their decorator.

Collins feels he wasn't neglecting her out of ambition but loyalty. "You make a kind of moral commitment to a band, a one for all, all for one thing. I felt I had a duty to the guys not to be the one to say, I'm sorry, I can't go to America three times this year and Europe twice and Japan." His wife presumably thought he had a duty to her. "Yeah. But you're hoping that this person will understand." Was he angry with her for not understanding? "Yeah, I was frustrated and angry." His heartbroken rage inspired him to write *In the Air Tonight*, catapulting him to solo stardom.

His next wife, Jill Tavelman, was a young American more amenable to life on the road as a rock'n'roll wife, but after the birth of Lily in 1989 the inevitable tension between domesticity and world tours resurfaced. Again, Collins hates people thinking he neglected his family for the limelight. "I never went looking for work. When someone wanted me to play, I would say yes. And I got better as I got older at saying no. I should," he adds, a bit unconvincingly, "have said no earlier. 'No, I've got to be home with my family.'"

If he could turn back the clock he'd really say that? With a sheepish grin, "No, not really. Well, I don't know." He chuckles, and gestures to each shoulder. "On one side you've got this little guy saying, yes, you would. And the other guy's saying, well, let's face it, you wouldn't."

That other guy must be persuasive, given what happened next. While on tour ➤

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again in 1994, he fell madly in love with a 21-year-old Swiss translator, Orianne Cevey. Fights with his soon-to-be-ex-wife were fatally conducted by fax, and his found their way onto the front page of The Sun, headlined "I'm faxing furious!" Collins would for ever more be known as the rock star who divorced his wife by fax.

"It's not actually the way it happened," he says. For more than 30 years he has been insisting the divorce was under way by then, and wasn't demanded by fax — but the reputational damage was done.

The new couple moved to Switzerland and married in 1999, but two sons and seven years later Orianne divorced him. She got £25 million, then the biggest settlement in British showbiz history. He bought a house down the road, retired from music and intended to devote himself to fatherhood — but hit the bottle.

Unravelled by booze, Collins was in intensive care in 2012 with acute pancreatitis when Orianne took the boys — Nicholas, then 11, and Mathew, then 7 — to Miami and remarried. He sobered up the following year, followed them to Florida and wrote his autobiography. When it came out in 2016 he surprised everyone with the news that Orianne and he were back together.

After this improbably happy ending, Collins toured in 2017 but then more or less vanished from public view. And then, as he says, "it went all wonky".

In 2020 the press reported that Orianne had secretly married another man behind his back while still living with him, and Collins had to go to court to get his ex-wife and her new husband out of the Miami house he had shared with her. I ask how he found out she had married someone else.

After a five-second silence, "Because she introduced me to him." He hesitates. "I don't know if I want to go into it." Then, slowly, "She spent a lot of time in Las Vegas and bought a house there. And I was thinking it was for work. And I think some of it was, but some of it was definitely not. She's not in my best books. Anyway she ended up

HOW DID HE FIND OUT HIS THIRD WIFE HAD MARRIED SOMEONE ELSE? AFTER A SHORT SILENCE HE SAYS: "SHE INTRODUCED ME TO HIM"

getting married in Las Vegas, and coming back I was instructed that that had happened." When she introduced him? "That same day."

He was at home in the lounge with their sons, watching TV. "And I got a message. And they were outside." He breaks off, looking conflicted. "I'd love to go into detail, but I just can see this coming back to bite me. But yeah, it was kind of unpleasant, unethical and not very nice. And she's admitted that she f***ed up big time. She's aware of what she did wrong, and how wrong it was, and how it must have affected me. But I can't quite forgive yet."

They're still in touch, he says, as co-parents. Something in his voice makes me ask if their contact could be anything more than that. "Well, I'd like it to be. But I don't think it's a good idea right now. Just because I know what I'm like. I would probably fall again."

Seriously? He allows a helpless smile. "Maybe. I mean, we were very much in love."

"I'd love somebody to kiss"

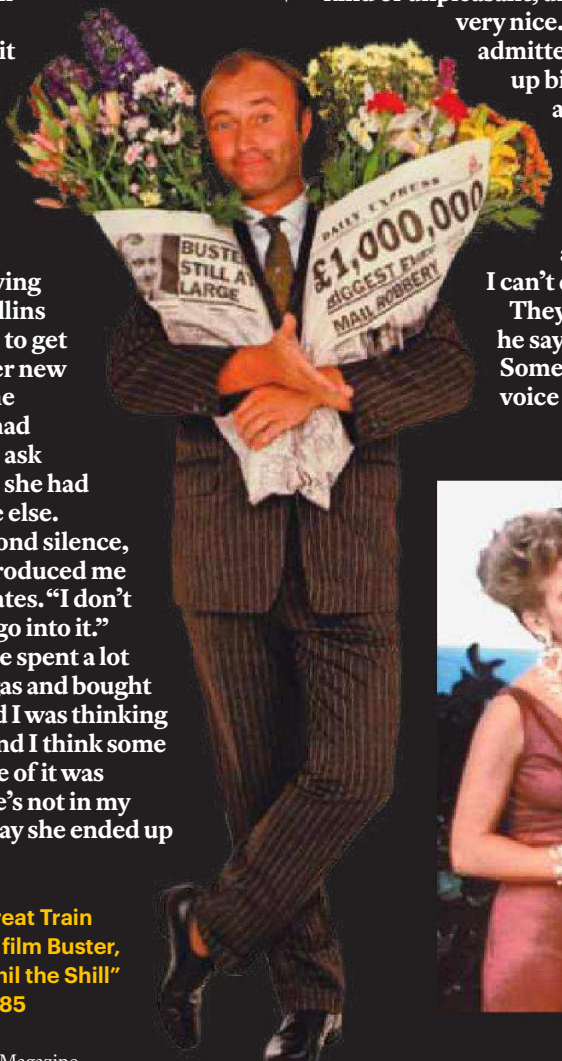
Collins is now single for the first time in his life. Even as a boy he had no shortage of girlfriends, growing up in an unglamorous suburb of west London. His father was a rather remote insurance agent, but his mother was a theatrical agent at a stage school in Acton that Collins attended. Drumming from the age of three, at 13 he played the Artful Dodger in a West End production of *Oliver!*. "I've never been so cool," his autobiography noted. He spent most of his teens at Soho's famous Marquee Club and had girls galore. Now he lives alone in Switzerland, with only a live-in nurse.

"I'd love to be in love again," he says softly. "I would love a relationship. Kissing somebody, for example. You know, pretty basic stuff."

I ask what he could do about making that happen. "I think it's probably too late for that. I'm not a very social person. I don't, you know, I don't go out."

The price his body has paid for a lifetime of drumming and singing has been high, but he details his daily life without self-pity. He gets up for a "healthy breakfast" between 10 and 11am, and chats with his nurse while she helps him walk six laps round the house. A "lovely" Australian physio called Melissa comes three times a week, and he sees his doctor regularly — but most of the time he watches telly.

Sky News keeps him up to date, and he likes *Shooting Stars* and loves *Wolf Hall*. "Watched it four times." He seldom listens to music, but has subscribed to



Collins played a Great Train robber in the 1988 film Buster, after his role as "Phil the Shill" in Miami Vice in 1985

YouTube and can't believe all the stuff he's found to watch — "Mind-boggling" — so I ask what he searches for.

"Serial killers." His face lights up. "Serial killers. I know more about serial killers than I do about music now. They come up on YouTube now, people I've never heard of. 'God, you know, killed how many people?' I find it fascinating. Brilliant." Serial killer dramas too? "Yeah, I've watched the *Monster* series, it's fictionalised versions of the real people. But I much prefer the factual stuff."

He says he doesn't search for himself, but the algorithms keep finding him. "I'm a big Zeppelin fan, and so the algorithms led me to 'Did Phil Collins f*** up Live Aid?' Right, so I think I've got to watch this podcast. I can't ignore it if it's there."

Most famous people, I observe, adopt the exact opposite policy. Aware that the online world is awash with people talking about them, they take care not to look. Why does he think he can't help risking it?

"Well, there's always a chance it won't be as bad as you think it is." He pauses. "And there's certain things that are like Achilles' heels." Such as?

"The Live Aid Zeppelin thing."

Hearing him revisit an indignity long forgotten by almost everyone else alive is a kind of agony. He devoted a chapter of his autobiography to his 1985 Live Aid performance with Robert Plant, Jimmy Page and John Paul Jones, widely panned as an unrehearsed shambles, but still can't help relitigating his version of what went wrong. To cut a long story short, he didn't ask to perform at both concerts, or know he'd be the only artist to do so; it wasn't his idea, and he didn't mean to look like a diva. When Plant and Page had suggested he play a few tracks with them in the US show, alongside another drummer, he didn't know this would be framed as a Led Zeppelin reunion. When he flew in by Concorde and helicopter, fresh from Wembley, he didn't know they'd been rehearsing for a week.

"And then this guy who's doing the podcast says Phil Collins stops drumming because he doesn't know what he's doing." Dismay is etched on his face. "And I was deliberately staying out of the way because it could have been a train wreck."

"The ugliest man in public life"

While preparing to meet him, I'd found myself recalling that Lady Bracknell line: "To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness." Is it possible for someone to be so relentlessly mischaracterised for decades without any basis in truth? He has been trying to correct narratives about himself for his entire career; even at the height of his fame the thinness of his skin was notorious. He was forever phoning music critics to complain about reviews, and now tells me about his introduction to the internet in the mid-1990s.

Finding fans' comments on a tour website, he began correcting inaccuracies. Soon he was posting long weekly essays, "and really quite enjoyed it", until a fan complained that the site was no longer fun "because the boss is watching". He looks faintly crestfallen. "I realised the thing that I thought was actually being quite nice and useful was actually inhibiting people from saying what they really felt. So I never did it again."

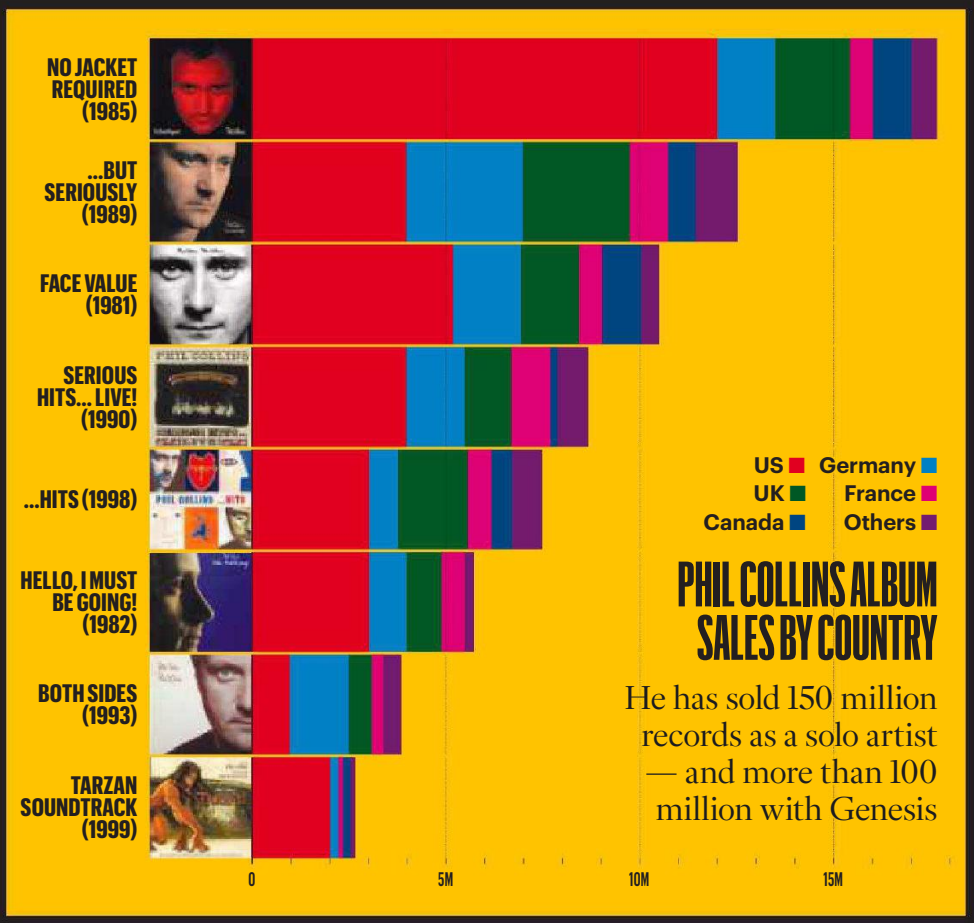
"I KNOW MORE ABOUT SERIAL KILLERS THAN I DO ABOUT MUSIC NOW. 'THEY KILLED HOW MANY PEOPLE?' I FIND IT FASCINATING"

But just one unsmiling face in the crowd every time he performed could undo him. The second he'd spot it, "I'm more interested in why that person is not enjoying it than the 16,000 people that are." Everyone there might as well have been hating it? "Yeah, to me."

When his tour reached the UK following Faxgate, he decided to begin the opening night with a little speech about it. "I didn't mean it in a preachy way. I just felt that everybody, especially the women, were judging me." Most celebrities feel no need to justify themselves to their fans. "Well, to me, to be so arrogant as to think that they'll love you whatever — I don't get that. I felt at least I had to try to set the record straight."

Every journalist's cruel word about his new romance with Orianne was seared on his memory. "Chrissy Iley. She was the one that went for the jugular." He can still quote Julie Burchill calling him "the ugliest man in public life since George Orwell", and blamed "oily" Piers Morgan, then the editor of The Mirror, for "fanning the flames". Collins read it all, because "once you know it's there you have to look".

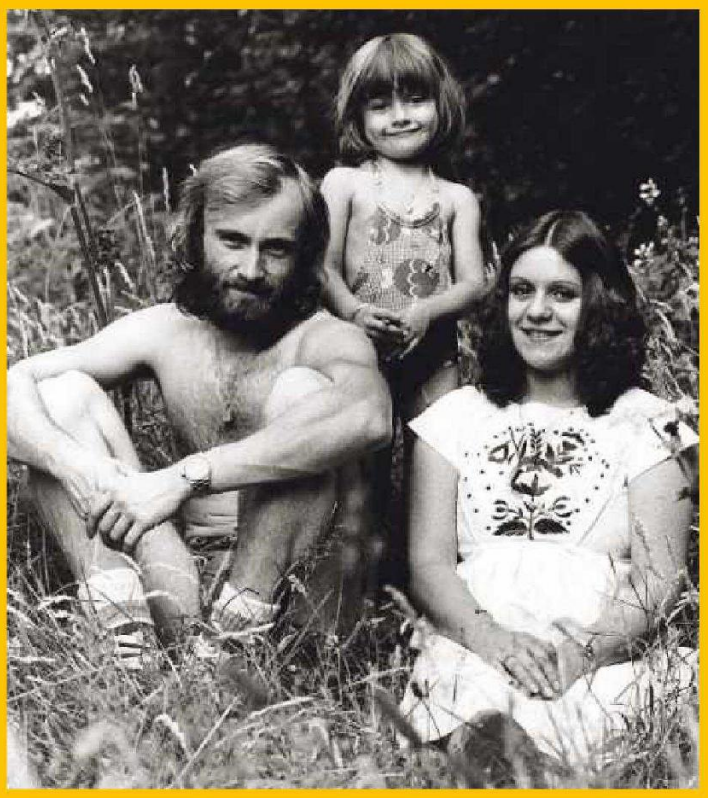
Why he didn't build himself a firewall impregnable to rebuke, as other famous people do, becomes clear when he talks about his own experience of becoming famous. "It's like I've become a ➤

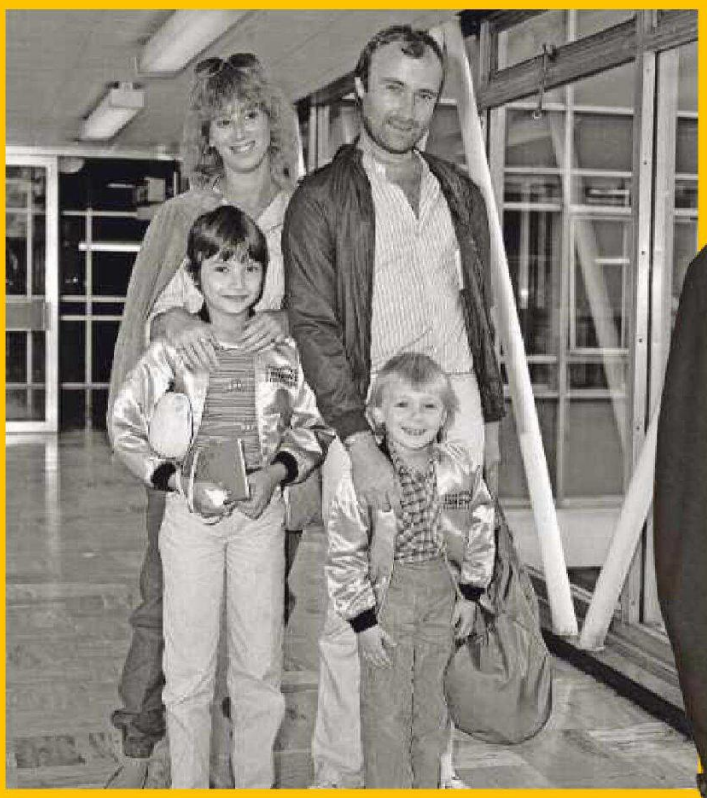


PHIL COLLINS ALBUM SALES BY COUNTRY

He has sold 150 million records as a solo artist — and more than 100 million with Genesis

ALAMY





member of a club that I really shouldn't be in. I don't feel that I fit into that club. If you're just a regular guy having a conversation in a pub, and you walk away and you think someone's saying, 'Oh, what an arsehole he was,' that still would bother me as much as it would bother anybody, I would think. To me it's just human nature."

Only now does his lifelong sense of being misjudged make sense. Collins always saw himself as a regular guy, while the world saw a superstar, so of course everything he said or did kept being misconstrued. The culprit wasn't really him, nor his critics, but the discrepancy between his public and self-image.

His analysis of the ill will he incurred has been philosophical. His ubiquity in the 1980s, he has often reflected, simply became insufferable. But I wonder how he metabolised the hate internally.

"Well, you know, I've looked back at some of these things." He tells me he transferred all his old VHS tapes of himself on to DVD, and when he watched them "I kind of didn't like me very much. I didn't like the way I came off."

He hesitates. "Maybe I'm kind of reading things into it that weren't there. Because if you know that someone's got a problem with you, you're interested to know what they think is the problem so that you can maybe fix it."

What problem did he see? "Maybe just a little bit of a know-all," he says quietly. "A sort of a little smart guy."

THE Sun
EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW OF NEW SONIC GAME
SONIC & KNUCKLES
See MEGA GUIDE - Page 40
PHIL: I'M FAXING FURIOUS
4-letter blast for wife
Here cons the bride
SHE'S A BIGAMIST

Above, from left: with his first wife, Andrea Bertorelli, and her daughter, Joely, whom he adopted, in Surrey, 1976; with Jill Tavelman and his kids Joely and Simon, 1982; marrying Orianne Cevey in Lausanne, 1999

I ask which era is most uncomfortable to watch. "Eighties, Nineties…" He laughs. "You name it."

Making up with McCartney

His autobiography's account of his descent into alcoholism is hair-raising. He disgraced himself on planes, fell down stairs, frightened his young sons, bolted from rehab after just a week, and had to be medevaced off a Caribbean island from a family holiday to dry out in hospital in New York.

He was sober when the book came out thanks to Antabuse, a drug prescribed to alcoholics to induce severe nausea and headaches if they so much as touch a drink. Alcohol, he wrote, had "nearly killed me", but his "Drinking Years" were behind him.

He can't remember when he started again. "When I was drinking the calendar goes out the window." He just knows "something happened and I stopped taking the Antabuse. I resented the fact that I couldn't drink." He can't remember when his old friend Eric Clapton got him into his rehab clinic in Antigua for

Left: he was accused in 1994 of divorcing Tavelman by fax; with his son Mathew, a footballer with Austria Salzburg. Below: as the Artful Dodger in Oliver! in 1967; with Paul McCartney in 1986 — they are friends again

a month, to no avail; Collins opened a bottle on the flight home.

This time it wasn't spirits, only wine. "But I'd have wine when I woke up. That was what I'd want for breakfast, a glass of wine. But I didn't drink into the night, you know. So I wasn't really aware of having a problem, to be honest." Most people would think wine for breakfast was a clue. "Oh yeah. No, it was a problem."

His drinking was out of control. In November 2023 he was rushed into hospital. Discharged three days before Christmas, just weeks later he was rushed back into intensive care and spent seven months in hospital. "I was very lucky to have come out of that. Needless to say, I haven't had a drink since."

His pancreas is permanently scarred and his kidneys barely function, but he has spent the past two years repairing other damage. His second wife is helping him with a King's Trust charity auction taking place in Los Angeles in November, and things between them are "great". The auction has also healed a decade-long rift with Paul McCartney.

In a 2016 interview in The Sunday Times Magazine he said the former Beatle had always treated him condescendingly. McCartney read this and emailed him, "saying, 'I'm a bit disappointed, blah blah'. He said don't be so… 'sacrosanct' was the word he used. I'm not sure what that means, but anyway it kind of left a bad taste in my mouth and obviously left a bad taste in his." After Collins recently wrote to people he had worked with, asking them to donate memorabilia to the auction, McCartney called and said he'd find some to donate. "And by the way," McCartney added, "I read something."

Collins couldn't look happier as he recalls the conversation. "I knew where it was going, and said, 'Thank God you've brought it up.' Because he's part of my life, you know? And I wish I hadn't said it, although it did happen. But we've made up, he's happy about the fact that we discussed it, and I'm happy we discussed it, so it was just really lovely that it's gone full circle now."

He has even forgiven Piers Morgan. "I've had my run-ins with Piers, but I watch his show every Saturday morning.

I ASK WHICH ERA OF PHIL COLLINS WAS MOST UNCOMFORTABLE TO WATCH BACK. "EIGHTIES, NINETIES… YOU NAME IT!"

I really look forward to it, because I find I agree with him." I tell him I'll pass this on, and he looks delighted. "It's like the McCartney thing. I don't like people going around thinking I hate them."

Collins had no idea his daughter Lily felt deeply hurt by him, until she published an open letter to him in her 2017 memoir. The actress wrote about the "sadness and anger I felt toward the things you did or didn't do, did or didn't give me", and of the choices he'd made that "I don't excuse".

"I was quite shocked and a little bit sad. But she's told me why now, and she takes it all back. She wished she'd never done it. I have a wonderful relationship with Lily now. So everything has a happy ending, most of the time."

His son Simon, 49, a musician, lives with his mother, Andrea, and "I don't see him as much as I'd like to". Simon missed the new year gathering because he was in hospital, "but he'll be at the next one". He has struggled with drug addiction, ➤

ALAMY, ALPHA PHOTOS, GETTY IMAGES, NEWS GROUP NEWSPAPERS LTD, MATTHEW COLLINS / INSTAGRAM, SHUTTERSTOCK

ERNIE KICKED THE DOOR OPEN ...

Ernie (left) and Tony (centre) at Hunter's Winery in 1987

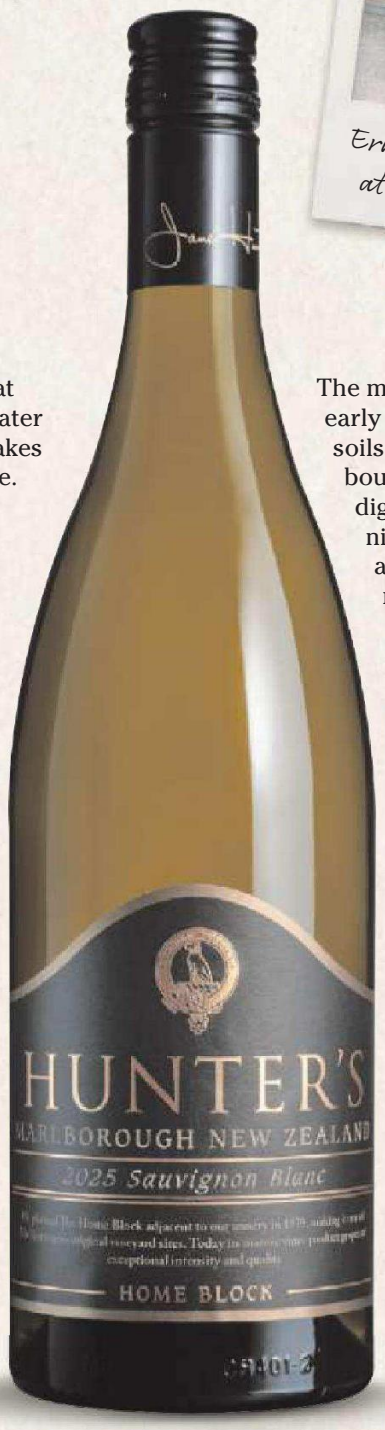
Marlborough ... a wine region that went from nothing to world beater in about the time it normally takes vines simply to get comfortable. Forty years. A blink.

And at the centre of it all was Ernie Hunter – Belfast born, genial, unstoppable – and his Australian wife Jane. They were the first to march Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc out into the wider world ... and what a debut.

They brought it to London ... to our Sunday Times Wine Festival ... where it didn't just win, it swept the room, taking more votes than any wine before or since. Caused such a stir it was even debated in the New Zealand parliament.

I remember Ernie in those days: mischievous twinkle ... unstoppable enthusiasm ... the sort of man who could make you believe the impossible before lunch. He had that pioneer's spark. He helped create Marlborough long before Marlborough quite believed in itself.

Sadly, he didn't live long enough to see the full triumph ... but his valley certainly did. What were once sheep paddocks are now vineyards as far as the eye can see.



The magic? Geography, geology and a few early believers with grit. Marlborough's soils are basically heaps of stones – boulders in places – forcing roots to dig deep. South Island sunshine, cool nights, mountains keeping the rain away ... perfect for grapes. The result? Sauvignon Blanc turned up to maximum volume.

The latest vintage of Hunter's Home Block – the original vineyard – has just landed.

It's usually snapped up before anyone has time to clear a space on the cellar floor. But, thanks to our 40-year friendship, a couple of hundred cases are always earmarked for our customers ...

Ernie would have insisted.

Tony Laithwaite CBE
Club Co-founder

Hunter's Home Block Sauvignon Blanc 2025
sundaytimeswineclub.co.uk
Exclusive wines delivered to your door

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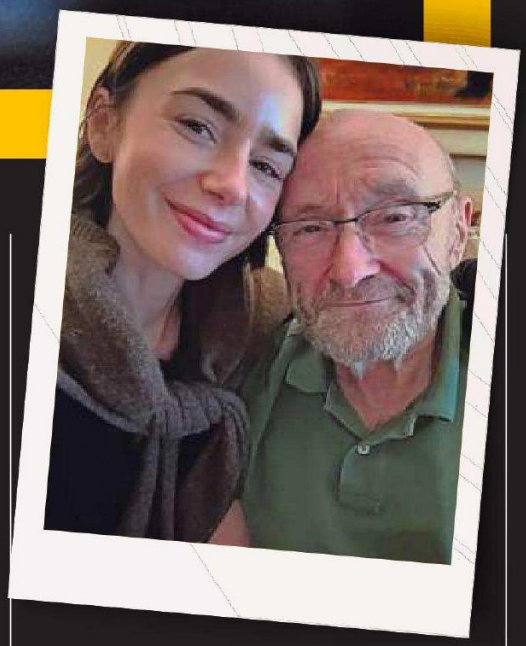


In Berlin on the final Genesis tour in 2022, with his son Nic on drums. Right: with his daughter Lily this year on his 75th birthday

"and Dad's got to put his hand up and say, 'How much am I responsible for this?' But all I can say is that we're good now."

His daughter Joely, 53, produces independent films and has a 17-year-old daughter; Mathew, 21, is a professional footballer for Austria Salzburg; and Nicholas, 25, is a drummer and played on his father's last solo tour in 2017-19 and Genesis's final tour in 2021-22.

"There's a lot been thrown at them over the years, and I dread to think what that's been like having to deal with that." Mathew confronted it at new year. "He said, 'My dad's been married three times to three different women and everybody in the world knows about it.' But all of us are good now and have been for a while. So it all works out in the end."

"I wish I could still play"

As a cautionary tale about interacting with the public, he tells his children a story about Steve Davis. In the early 1980s he was touring with Genesis when he spotted the snooker star standing at a bar and approached him for an autograph. "And he didn't once look up." Davis told him to get a pen and paper and handed him the autograph without even realising it was Collins. "And I went away thinking, wow, that's my Steve Davis story. So I tell my kids, 'Just remember, this is the one moment they're going to meet you. That impression is going to be the one they go away with for ever.'"

Even relations with his first wife are good. "We spent years at each other's throats, but right now we're in an incredible place. We're closer than we've been since we were married. I say here and now, she is not the guilty person. We were both guilty of not reading each other properly." He pauses and smiles. "I think I've softened as a person as I've got older."

On November 14 Collins will be formally inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. I'd assumed that must have happened years ago. "That's what a lot of people actually thought. I think people on the board thought I was already in." Had they never spotted that he wasn't, "I'd have just put it down to being English and just being invisible."

Invisible feels implausible, given that only McCartney and Michael Jackson have sold more records as both solo artists and band members. He says he only discovered this distinction by accident when he happened to read it in Billboard, which surprises me, because the 1997 biography quoted a friend saying, "He would be very anxious about record sales, asking if they were in any way worse than they were last week or last year." Now he looks surprised. "No, no, no. That's not the way I think."

A former pop star, I say, once told me he had never met a reluctant star. "Reluctant star," he'd scoffed, "my arse." Collins grins. "I can see people groaning and saying, 'Yeah, right,' but honestly, for me it was always just the love of playing. I went from being a drummer that sang to a singer that drummed — and I liked being the drummer that sang." He adds sadly, "I wish I could play still. It's been my life since I was given a drum kit at three. I've always wanted to just do that."

As we say goodbye I ask why he gave this interview. "Well, you get to 75 and it's a kind of milestone. Or millstone. But I mean," he adds quickly, "I didn't say, 'I want to do some interviews.'"

After all he has achieved and survived, Collins has more right than anyone to talk about himself. As his publicist and assistant walk me down to the lobby, they talk about their joy at seeing him well again, taking pride in his life again after so nearly losing it to drink. On the hotel steps we take a moment to marvel together at this miracle.

"You know," his publicist says happily, "this interview was all his own idea." ■

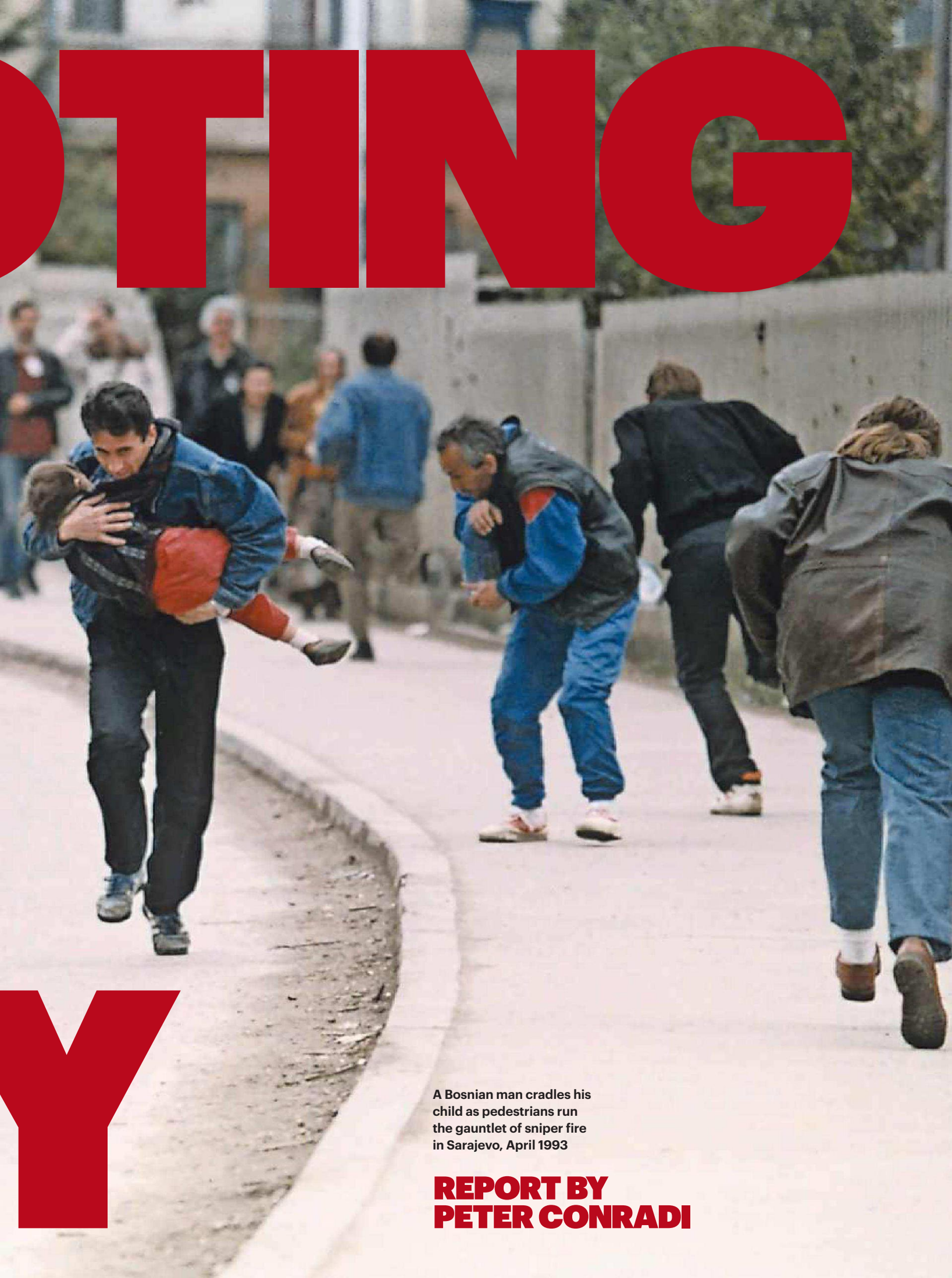
GETTY IMAGES, INSTAGRAM

SHOO

During the Siege of Sarajevo, hundreds of residents were killed by snipers hiding in the hills above the city. Did foreign tourists pay to join the gunmen on “human safaris” and murder civilians for fun?

PARTY

OTING



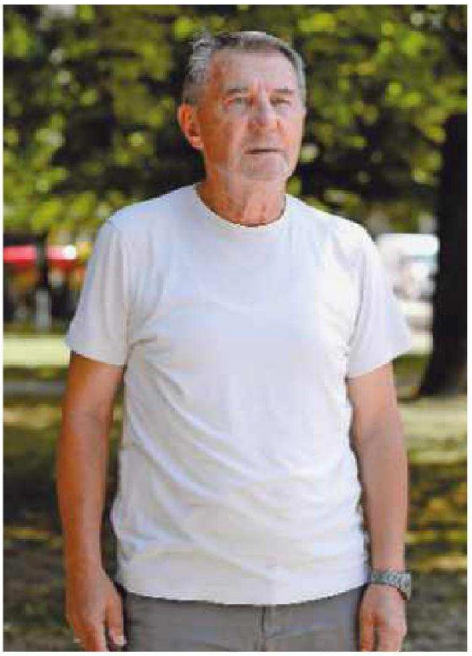
Y

A Bosnian man cradles his child as pedestrians run the gauntlet of sniper fire in Sarajevo, April 1993

REPORT BY PETER CONRADI

n the heart of Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital, is a small museum dedicated to the children who died during the three and a half years in the early 1990s when the city was encircled by Serb forces. Each child is commemorated with a drawer containing a card with a brief description of their short life and how it ended, together with an object chosen by their parents. One drawer contains a cuddly pink rabbit, others a school bag and a portable cassette recorder.

Aida Bicakcic, 42, an official from the culture ministry who shows me around, could easily have been among the victims. She was born in 1984, the year Sarajevo hosted the Winter Olympics. "I am part of the 'Vucko' generation," she says in a reference to the loveable wolf character that became a mascot of the Games. "Most of the kids who were targeted during the war were my age." Alipasino Polje, an area of 1970s tower blocks in the west of the city near the Olympic village where she grew up, was one of the worst hit. "There were many massacres there. Even schools were bombed."



From top: Fikret Grabovica with his wife, Advija, and daughter Irma in 1985. Irma was killed in 1993; Grabovica last month. Below, from left: Aida Bicakcic at the War Childhood Museum; mementoes of a child who died in the Siege of Sarajevo

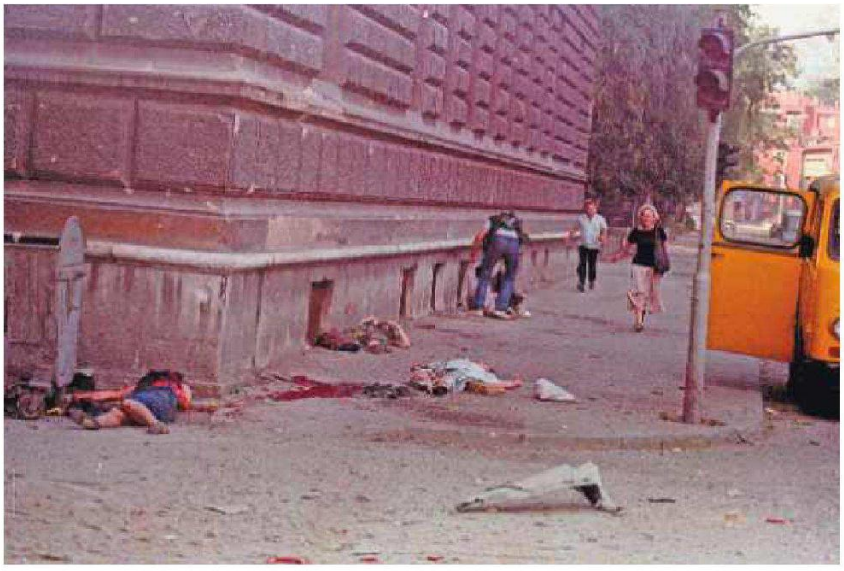
During the slow-motion break-up of communist Yugoslavia, which lasted for much of the 1990s, Serbs, Croats, Bosnians and other groups who had coexisted for many years suddenly turned on one another, killing as many as 140,000 people.

One of its grimmest chapters was the Siege of Sarajevo, which lasted 1,425 days from April 5, 1992. The immediate cause was the decision by the government of the republic of Bosnia Herzegovina to follow Slovenia and Croatia in declaring independence from Yugoslavia. The move was bitterly opposed by leaders of the Bosnian Serbs, who made up almost a third of the new country's population. They sent a military force 13,000 strong to take the capital but were held off by government forces. About 13,950 people — 5,400 of them civilians — died during one of the longest sieges in the history of modern warfare. Many of Sarajevo's buildings are still pockmarked with bullet holes. The impact on its people goes even deeper.

During the siege the city's more than 400,000 residents, a mixture of Bosnian Muslims, Croats and Serbs, lived under constant bombardment. Venturing outside was to risk being caught up in mortar attacks, machinegunned or hit by a sniper's bullet. People learnt to zigzag as they ran.

"We had no water, no electricity," Bicakcic recalls. Now with three children of her own, she still remembers a recurring nightmare she had as a little girl. "It was the meadow, the place where I normally used to play, but it was running with blood. I shared it with my mother and she said, 'We are leaving.' After four months of the war she and her younger brother were sent to stay with their grandparents in Zenica, 40 miles to the northwest. "It was the only thing they could do to protect us." Her parents followed shortly afterwards.

The family did not return to Sarajevo until after the Dayton Accords, signed in December 1995, that finally brought an end



From top: a view from the Old Jewish Cemetery in Sarajevo, a location used by snipers; a Bosnian fighter defends the city in June 1992; bodies are strewn in the street after a mortar attack later that year

PREVIOUS PAGES: AP. THESE PAGES: VANJA CERIMAGIC FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE, AFP, AP, AP, PETER CONRADI

"THERE WERE FIFTY LOCATIONS WHERE GROUPS OF CHILDREN WERE MURDERED WHEN THEIR PARENTS LET THEM OUT TO PLAY"

to the war. She laughs when I ask if she or any of her friends and family ever had therapy. "It would have been impossible. We normalised the experience, survived it and moved forward."

The museum was created by the Association of Parents of the Murdered Children of Sarajevo, a group set up in 2007 to preserve the memory of those killed and to help their parents. According to official figures, 1,601 children died during the siege. Of these the group has catalogued 534 — one in ten of whom was killed by snipers.

Fikret Grabovica, 72, the group's president, says there is no doubt the children were deliberately targeted — among them the elder of his two daughters, Irma, 11, who was killed by shrapnel from a mortar as she was playing with friends in the courtyard outside their building.

"There were about fifty locations where groups of three, four, five, six or seven were murdered, particularly when fighting was not particularly intense and their parents let them out to play," he says. "The Bosnian Serbs thought that by killing children they would break the morale of the defenders and the city itself and make it easier to conquer and occupy, but they were wrong."

Who were the killers?

Most of the deaths were caused by members of the Sarajevo-Romanija Corps of the army of the Republika Srpska, the self-proclaimed Bosnian Serb republic, several of whose commanders were later convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Hague. They were helped by volunteers from Serbia itself and mercenaries from countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Romania and Greece keen to help their Orthodox Christian cousins.

But evidence is now mounting that their ranks were also swollen by a third group — wealthy, thrill-seeking hunters from Italy and other western European ➤

countries, possibly including Britain, drawn not by ideology but by the ultimate thrill of killing people.

Such extraordinary claims, first made during the siege, sound like the stuff of dystopian science fiction. Yet they have resurfaced and multiplied in recent months, fuelled by a book, *I Cecchini del Weekend* (*The Weekend Snipers*) by Ezio Gavazzeni, an Italian journalist and thriller writer. Gavazzeni claims as many as 400-500 people, predominantly his fellow countrymen, took part in what he calls "human safaris to Sarajevo", paying up to £300,000 to the Bosnian Serbs for the privilege. Many of these "tourists" are thought to be still alive. "There are people who can afford to spend €200,000 on shooting a lion. This was the same thing," he told me. There have even been claims that Aleksandar Vucic, the Serb president, who was then working as a journalist, was involved — something he has vehemently denied.

So did such "safaris" really exist on the scale and with the degree of organisation that Gavazzeni claims? And if so, why for so long were no efforts made to pursue those involved, despite suggestions that Italian and other intelligence services were aware at the time of what was going on?

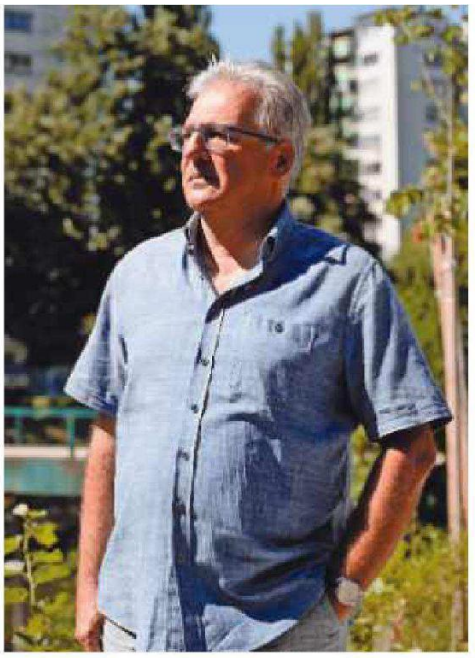
The human safaris

Perched on the slopes of Mount Trebevic south of Sarajevo, the Old Jewish Cemetery has been used as a last resting place for more than four centuries. But during the siege of Sarajevo its location high above the city made it the perfect place for the Bosnian Serbs to rain down fire on the civilians trapped below. The trees are higher than they were three decades ago and the foliage much denser, but it is still possible to find a point among the crumbling tombs that would provide a clear line of sight to "Sniper Alley", the main thoroughfare on the opposite side of the Miljacka River.

Other points in the hills that surround the Bosnian capital provided equally good vantage points for the assailants armed with mortars, Kalashnikovs and sniper rifles. The fighters also took up positions towards the west in the blocks of 1960s communist-era flats in the Grbavica district, far closer to the front line, picking off passers-by with ease.

My guide to the sites is Edin Zubcevic, 57, a writer and the founder of Jazz Fest Sarajevo. Like other men of his generation, he served as a soldier defending the city during the war. He puts himself for a moment in the shoes of his Serb foes. "If I had been organising a 'safari', I would have brought the people here, or to the hills over there," he says as we walk in the sunshine through Grbavica. At one point he stops and points at a street: "My uncle was shot here in September 1992. It was a single bullet in the neck. It took him five minutes to die."

During the siege Zlatko Miletic, 60, now a member of the parliamentary assembly of Bosnia Herzegovina, was the commander of a police unit in Sarajevo. His area of responsibility ran from the parliament building where we meet for about two miles westwards on the opposite side of the river from Grbavica . "It was the scene of some of the most frequent activities by snipers," recalls Miletic, who, as befits a former policeman, speaks slowly and precisely.



"AFTER THE HUNT THEY FEASTED ON MEAT IN A CAFÉ. THEY CELEBRATED KILLING PEOPLE. HOW CAN YOU LIVE WITH KILLING A CHILD?"

Edin Zubcevic fought the Serbs in Sarajevo in the 1990s. Below: the Italian author Ezio Gavazzeni claims 400-500 foreigners took part in "human safaris"

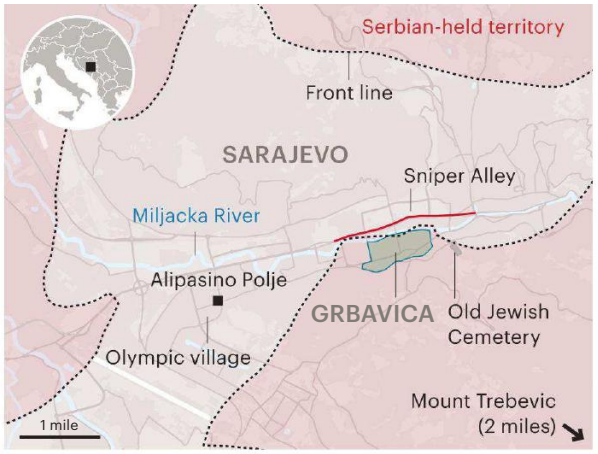
It was in 1993 when he first heard rumours about shooters from western European countries. Such information was gleaned from occasional population swaps. When Bosnian Muslims who had been trapped on the "wrong" side arrived in Sarajevo they brought with them vital intelligence about what was going on behind Serb lines.

"We were told that there was this international tourism thing, that people were coming from Europe to shoot," he says. "They heard about it because after the foreigners had finished shooting they had parties, not in restaurants or bars but in closed places, and they were often pretty wild. Our people often served them, and our women were sexually harassed or raped."

Aleksandar Licanin, 63, claims to have witnessed such parties as a volunteer with a Serbian tank unit. In an interview with The Times in February, Licanin claimed to have first seen well-dressed foreigners taking up positions in the Old Jewish Cemetery in 1993 or 1994 with forces commanded by Slavko Aleksic, a Bosnian Serb paramilitary. "They wore expensive leather jackets and I was told they were Italians, Germans and British," he said. "They were helped to find targets, and shooting from the cemetery was a clear shot. You had everything.

"After the hunt, a café would be cleared out to make room for them and Aleksic's truck, which had a skull mounted on the bonnet, would arrive. We would leave — we didn't want contact with them," Licanin said. "They ate a lot, feasting on meat — roast pig and lamb," he added. Beer, whisky and cognac were also served. "They were celebrating killing people. I can't imagine how you can live with killing a child."

Bosnian intelligence was also aware of their presence, according to Edin Subasic, a former Bosnian intelligence officer whom I meet at the Mövenpick hotel, across the river from Grbavica. During the war, he says, he and his colleagues came across one of the "weekend warriors" recruited by the Serbian Radical Party, an ultranationalist group led by Vojislav Seselj — some of whose members, like Seselj himself, were convicted of crimes against humanity. The man, in his twenties and from Serbia, was captured in late 1993.



BOSANSKOHERCEGOVAČKI NEZAVISNI DNEVNIK

LIST GODINE U SVIJETU 1992.

OSLOBOĐENJE

OSLOBOĐENJE ONASA

Sarajevo, godina LII Broj 16811 Subota 1. IV 1995. godine

NEVJEROVATNO OTKRIĆE ITALIJANSKE ŠTAMPE

"Snajperski safari" u Sarajevu

Jeziva svjedočenja o »ratnom turizmu« potvrđena pred »Sudom naroda« u Tridentu ● Srpski oficir nudio italijanskom novinaru da iz snajpera puca na staricu u blizini »Holidej Ina« ● Najradije pucaju na djecu

NEUROTIČNI RADOVAN KARADŽIĆ

Hitler u svom sokaku

BOSANSKOHERCEGOVAČKA RATNA HRONIKA

Nove žrtve u Bihaću

U granatiranju sjeveroistočnih slobodnih prostora ubijene dvije osobe ● Više ranjenih u Bi-

He told his interrogators, who included Subasic, of having travelled in a van with fellow volunteers and being surprised to be sharing it with three Italians and two other foreigners. Fighters from different countries were paid varying sums of money and, out of curiosity, one of the man's group asked the Italians how much they were getting. "And the Italians replied, 'No one is paying us. We are paying to be here,'" Subasic recalls.

Reporters pick up the story

On March 30, 1995, the Milan-based daily Corriere della Sera newspaper published an article about the "tourists". It was picked up on April 1 by Oslobodenje, a Bosnian daily, which ran a front-page story headlined "'Snajperski safari' u Sarajevu" ("Sniper safari" in Sarajevo). The report was short on detail.

At the time attention was focused on other horrors, notably the genocidal killing in July 1995 of more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men in and around Srebrenica.

It was almost three decades later in 2022 when the spotlight was again shone on the tourist snipers with the release of a documentary, *Sarajevo Safari*, by Miran Zupanic, a Slovenian film-maker. It began with testimony from an anonymous Slovenian man, said to have previously worked for Yugoslav intelligence. By the time of the siege, he said, he was being paid by an American intelligence agency — presumably the CIA. The man claimed to have witnessed western Europeans being brought to the Grbavica area and other positions around Sarajevo, where they were given rifles and allowed to shoot at people in the besieged city. Despite the explosive nature of its claims, the film did not have the impact that might have been expected.

The Italian thriller writer

Among those fascinated by the claims was Ezio Gavazzeni, an Italian author.

Below: the paramilitary Slavko Aleksic had a skull mounted on his car bonnet. Top right: the Bosnian newspaper Oslobodenje reported on the "sniper safaris" in April 1995

VANJA CERIMAGIC FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE, AFP, X.COM

He began to investigate and, using his findings, submitted a 17-page formal complaint to Italian prosecutors, who last November opened an investigation. His book was published in Italian in March and has since been translated into several languages. In it Gavazzeni paints a picture of a highly developed network centred on Italy that transported "tourists" to Belgrade and then on to Sarajevo, where they shot alongside the Bosnian Serbs for the weekend, and then brought them safely home again. Those taking part described themselves as "archers" and called their prey "deer". Among the participants, he wrote, was "a very famous Italian businessman, who is still sometimes seen on television", who spent a total of 340 million lire (equivalent to about £300,000 today) on six hours of shooting.

"I was able to meet one of the people involved, who explained how these trips were organised and carried out, and I interviewed three witnesses," Gavazzeni tells me via Zoom from his home in Milan, in between appearances at literary festivals. "These three figures proved to be crucial because they revealed facts and information that had never before come to light."

Similar assertions were made in another book, *Pay and Shoot* by Domagoj Margetic, a Croatian journalist, that came out the following month. Margetic, who speaks to me from Croatia, traces the origins of the "safaris" to trips by hunters from northern Italy, who came over the border to Yugoslavia in the 1970s and 1980s to kill deer, wild boar and other animals. At the time the country was still communist, and its intelligence service kept a close eye on foreigners and took a share of the money they paid.

Margetic claims to have spoken to Zvonko Horvatincic, a Croat who had previously worked for Yugoslav intelligence. He says Horvatincic told him that in the summer of 1992, several months into the siege, he had received a call from a wealthy Italian hunter, asking he if and some of his friends could come to shoot in Sarajevo. Margetic believes the venture grew from ➤

that, with Horvatincic making use of his old intelligence contacts. It is not known if Horvatincic is still alive.

Margetic first wrote about the "safaris" in the 1990s. At the time he was in contact with Nedzad Ugljen, a Bosnian intelligence officer who was looking into the subject but was shot dead in 1996. It was Ugljen, he claims, who gave him a "price list" specifying how much the hunters had to pay for each person they killed: an elderly man or woman was the cheapest at 60,000 German marks (the equivalent of about £50,000 today), the most expensive were a pregnant woman or child at more than 120,000 marks.

"They had a contest for who would shoot the most beautiful woman," he said. This was in addition to a basic fee of 100,000 marks and a few thousand on transport, which varied depending on whether they wanted to travel from Belgrade to the outskirts of Sarajevo by bus, car or military helicopter.

Margetic also relied heavily on the Bosnian Serb paramilitary Slavko Aleksic, but he died unexpectedly in hospital last December, aged 69. Three months earlier, two other Bosnian Serb commanders supposedly linked to the case, Branislav "Brnet" Gavrilovi, 61, and Vasilije "Vaske" Vidovic, 71, also died.

The apparent coincidence surprises Miletic, the former police commander. "I may be paranoid, but it seems very strange to me as a former policeman that all three died of natural causes in such a short period of time," he says. Miletic continues to follow the case. A few weeks ago, out of the blue, he received a letter from a Bosnian Serb who claimed to have been a sniper during the war and is at present in jail on unrelated charges. The man, who demanded anonymity for fear of reprisals from fellow prisoners, claims to have encountered these "tourists", given them weapons and showed them to their firing positions. Miletic has passed the letter to prosecutors.

Too evil to be true

Yet many who lived through the war have doubts about the existence of such "safaris" — at least on the scale claimed by Gavazzeni and Margetic. "This kind of operation would be so huge, it sounds like science fiction," says Nenad Fiser, a Bosnian former professor of philosophy who worked for 20 years as an intelligence analyst at the Hague tribunal. "It is portrayed as a well-oiled mechanism, but in the Balkans there isn't a well-oiled anything." Florence Hartmann, who was based in Belgrade for Le Monde in the early 1990s and travelled extensively to and from Sarajevo during the war, is also sceptical: she recalls how complicated it was to get around the city, not least owing to the time it took to get through multiple army checkpoints. In most cases the date when people were killed by snipers has been catalogued. She found a relatively small proportion died at weekends. "Most were killed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays," she says.

Although convinced some foreigners were involved, Miletic, the former police commander, believes the numbers were much smaller than Gavazzeni claims. "According to my assessment, in 1993 and 1994 there were ten to fifteen such incidents," he says. Subasic, the former Bosnian officer, agrees. "There is no doubt the Sarajevo safari happened, but I believe the numbers of people involved were less than 500," he says. "There would have been weekends when there was so much fighting that they would not want to risk bringing people." He also believes that if that number of people had taken part, there would have been more witnesses. Several influential figures on both sides, interviewed for a detailed investigation published last month by Balkan Insight, a respected news website that covers the region, were also sceptical.

There is also the question of how much western intelligence agencies knew about what was going on. Subasic, among others, has claimed that Sismi, Italy's military intelligence and security service at the time, was told about the safaris but there are conflicting versions as to when this happened and what, if anything, it did about it. Douglas H Wise, a former CIA officer who was stationed in Sarajevo during the war, told Balkan Insight he had never heard of foreigners paying to shoot at Sarajevo. Nor did any of the agency's declassified documents mention anything similar.

Gary Knight, a British photographer who covered the conflict from January 1993, has a more fundamental question: would anyone who wanted to join the Serbs have to pay so much money to do so? "No one had to pay the Serbians to go and shoot," he says. "You could volunteer your services and drive down to the front line and shoot Bosnians. The Serbs would welcome anybody to come and do that."

From left: the ultranationalist Serbian leader Vojislav Seselj appears in court at the Hague in 2003; Lucio Cavanna is under investigation in Italy; Giuseppe Vegnaduzzo is another suspect

A "PRICE LIST" SPECIFIED WHAT THE HUNTERS HAD TO PAY FOR EACH PERSON THEY KILLED: THE ELDERLY WERE THE CHEAPEST

Tourists on trial

Italian investigators have nevertheless been taking Gavazzeni's findings seriously. Their inquiries are meant to be conducted in secrecy, but details have leaked to the media. Giuseppe Vegnaduzzo, 80 — the first suspect to be questioned, in February, on suspicion of premeditated murder — is a retired lorry driver from San Vito al Tagliamento, a village in northeast Italy

not far from the Slovenian border. He has denied the accusation. Another, an unnamed 63-year-old businessman, was said by a witness of having boasted at a party at his home in Brianza, north of Milan, in 2008 or 2009 of having gone with his daughter's partner on a "sort of tourism trip" to Bosnia, saying it was "fun to shoot people" — apparently Bosnian Muslims. Questioned in April, he denied any involvement. A "nobleman" from Milan and another man from Tuscany are also among the suspects.

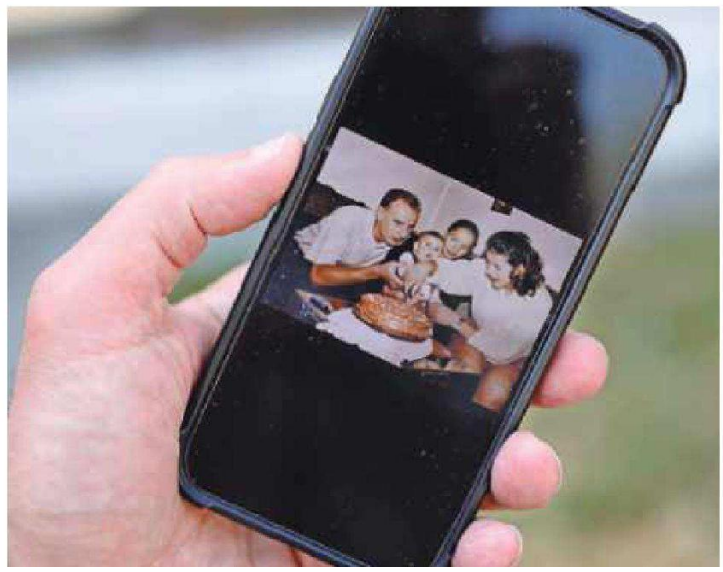
The most is known about a fifth man, Lucio Cavanna, 64, from Ponzone, a town northwest of Genoa, where he used to work for the local council. Tracked down by Italian journalists, he admitted to having been in Bosnia. "I wanted to go there because I've always had sympathies for the far right — I went to the Balkans because I hated Muslims," he said. Cavanna's ex-wife also reportedly told prosecutors that he used to complain to her of nightmares that he blamed on "having killed people during the war in Bosnia in the Nineties". To do so, she said, he initially flew from Milan for the weekend, but later "spent longer periods there as a sniper, shooting Muslims". Four other witnesses — who did not know each other — also told prosecutors he had told them about his trips. When questioned by prosecutors, Cavanna reportedly claimed he had made up the whole thing and denied having taken part in "paid safaris". A search of his home in June revealed a silencer for a military weapon and a photograph apparently of him from 30 years ago, armed and standing in uniform in the snow.

Civilians flee a sniper's gunfire in Sarajevo, 1992. Below, from left: Samir Cisic, whose daughter, Irina, was killed by a sniper in 1993 at a year old; the family celebrate her birthday

It is not known how long the Italian investigation will last or whether prosecutors will gather sufficient evidence to put the men on trial. The same is true in Austria, where prosecutors in Krems, west of Vienna, acting on a tip-off from locals, began in April investigating a 60-year-old man suspected of travelling several times to Bosnia, and also a second man, thought to be a friend.

At the end of June representatives from six countries met in the Hague at Eurojust, the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, to share their findings. Among them was a representative from Bosnia Herzegovina, where an investigation is also under way. But it is complicated by politics — not least because Marijana Cobovic, the prosecutor allocated to the case, is a Bosnian Serb.

Among those still waiting for the truth are Samir Cisic, 59, and his wife, Stana, 57, whose daughter, Irina, was killed by a sniper shortly after celebrating her first birthday. "We even managed to make a cake, even though it was without eggs, butter and sugar," Samir says. Five days later the little girl was out walking with her mother in the city when Stana heard a strange sound, a little like Velcro being torn apart. "My wife picked up Irina but without knowing what had happened," he adds. "She then saw Irina's eyes were moving really weirdly but couldn't see a wound." She died in hospital despite a six-hour operation to save her. The 7.9mm bullet that ripped her organs apart is preserved in the children's museum, together with the red top she was wearing the day she died. Her parents will never know the nationality of the shooter and whether she was killed for ideology — or for sport ■



VANJA CERIMAGIC FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE, ALAMY, GETTY IMAGES, RAINEWS, SHUTTERSTOCK

LOOK GOOD DO GOOD

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Mon 14 – Sun 20 Sept

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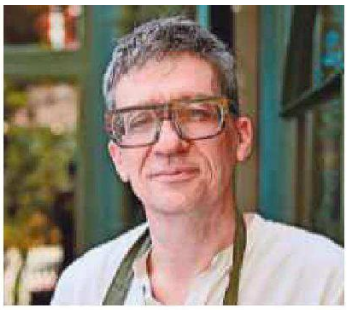
TABLE TALK

Simple summer suppers

Ben Tish's chicken schnitzel, citrus greens and almond aïoli



BEN TISH

Chicken schnitzel, citrus greens and almond aïoli

Crispy chicken schnitzel is my absolute favourite. Here it is served with bright citrus-dressed greens and a rich, nutty aïoli — it's simple but full of contrast. Everything feels fresh and sharp, keeping it really light for an August supper. I'd serve this with fried potatoes.

Ingredients
(Serves 4)
Time 25 min
- 4 chicken breasts, butterflied and lightly flattened
- 100g plain flour
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 150g panko breadcrumbs
- Extra virgin olive oil
- 2 large handfuls of greens (spring greens, chard or cavolo nero), finely shredded
- ½ lemon, zested and juiced
- 1 tbsp sweet wine vinegar, such as chardonnay
- 25g parmesan, finely grated, plus extra for serving

For the almond aïoli
- 80g blanched almonds
- 1 garlic clove
- 1 tsp Dijon mustard
- 1 tbsp white wine or sherry vinegar
- 150ml extra virgin olive oil

1 Start with the aïoli. Using a handheld blender, mini food processor or pestle and mortar, blend the almonds, garlic, mustard and vinegar to a paste, then slowly add the oil until thick and smooth. Season well and reserve in the fridge.

2 Season the chicken well, then coat first in the flour, then the egg and finally the breadcrumbs. Heat a generous layer of olive oil in a wide pan and fry the chicken for 3 min on each side until golden and crisp. Drain well on a kitchen towel, sprinkle with salt and set aside to rest.

3 Add the olive oil to the greens and massage them to break up the fibres a little. Then add the lemon zest, juice and the vinegar, and season with salt and pepper. Toss through the parmesan and leave for 3 min for the acid in the vinegar and citrus to "cook" the greens.

4 Serve the schnitzel with the citrus greens and a generous spoonful of almond aïoli. Add extra parmesan if you wish.

Baked orzo, courgettes, basil and crème fraîche

Soft courgettes, creamy orzo and a vivid green basil sauce bring everything together into something generous, glossy and vibrant. Cooking orzo this way (pilaf-style) gives the dish a nice depth of nutty flavour and makes for an easy centrepiece to place on the table. I serve with some salad and focaccia.

Ingredients
(Serves 4)
Time 45 min
- Extra virgin olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, sliced
- 2 medium green courgettes, thinly sliced
- 750ml hot vegetable or chicken stock
- Small bunch of basil
- 300g orzo
- 150g crème fraîche
- 1 lemon, zested

1 Heat a couple of slugs of extra virgin olive oil in an ovenproof pan, then soften the garlic and courgettes without colouring them, about 10 min.

2 Remove roughly a third of the courgettes and blend with a ladleful of hot stock and a handful of basil to create a loose green puree.

3 Stir the orzo into the remaining courgettes, coating it in the oil, season well and pour in the rest of

the stock. Bring to a simmer, transfer to an oven at 180C fan/gas 4 and bake until cooked through, rich and thickened, about 25 min.

4 Stir through the green puree, finish with a dollop of crème fraîche, lemon zest and more basil, then drizzle with olive oil.

Burrata, peach and tomato with toasted coriander seeds and fried bread

This is a peak August dish, hopefully eaten alfresco with ripe juicy fruit, soft cheese and a crunch from the sourdough and coriander seeds. I use its dressing for all manner of salads as it's highly versatile.

Ingredients
(Serves 4)
Time 10 min
- 3 ripe peaches, broken up
- 400g ripe tomatoes, cored and cut into chunks
- 1 tsp coriander seeds
- 1 tbsp red wine vinegar
- Extra virgin olive oil
- 2 slices of sourdough
- 2 x 125g burrata
- Handful of mint and dill leaves

1 Halve and stone the peaches and break into chunks, reserving any juices in a bowl. Core and cut up the tomatoes, adding juices to the bowl.

2 Lightly crush and toast the coriander seeds in a small dry pan until fragrant. Transfer to the bowl with the juices in it, then pour over the vinegar and 2 tablespoons of olive oil. Season well.

3 Tear the sourdough into small pieces and fry in olive oil until golden and crisp. Season well.

4 Toss the peaches, tomatoes and fried bread with the coriander seed dressing and season well. Arrange on a platter with the torn burrata, scatter over the mint and dill, drizzle over any excess dressing and juices, then serve ■

Ben Tish is chef director of Cubitt House; cubitthouse.co.uk

STEVEN JOYCE FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE, GETTY IMAGES

KITCHEN CLINIC

Our experts answer your questions

Q I love cooking Indian food but I am forever buying new spices and herbs every time I try a recipe. What are the key herbs and spices that I need? MR, Lincoln

A For advice on cooking Indian food I always turn to Nisha Katona. She's the founder of the Indian street food chain Mowgli and the author of seven cookbooks, including *The 30-Minute Mowgli*.

In that book Katona lists nine spices and herbs that deliver on big, instant flavour. First, ensure you have ground turmeric, "the mother of all curry", Katona says. It's often added with other soft ingredients and provides an earthy foundation. Then there's chilli powder, "the father of all curry", which adds a gentle background of smoke. Garam masala is the ultimate meat spice, and cumin seeds "govern many vegetarian Indian dishes". Ground coriander provides "a herby feminine note", while ground cumin is a subtle essential.

Mustard and nigella seeds are two more staples. Finally, panch phoron: "This is the Bengali five-spice blend that is enigmatic and haunting." In addition, I always have plenty of fresh curry leaves. They have such a distinctive flavour and aroma ■

By Hannah Evans

Questions to kitchenclinic @sundaytimes.co.uk

A coaching inn that's got lost somewhere along the way

THE FEATHERED NEST

OXFORDSHIRE

★★★☆☆

My childhood memories of country pubs are of hearty meals, bric-a-brac on the walls, and outdoor roadside seating that would make Evel Knievel question the health and safety implications. Their car parks were full of gaffer-taped Land Rovers that predated domestic electricity, with rugs in the boot patterned with several generations of labrador excrement.

Many of these one-time coaching inns, particularly those with OX postcodes, have now decided to pivot to destination dining, thanks to a fate even worse than highwaymen: London blow-ins. Some of these restaurants are fit for the palate of a Cameron or a Cowell; whereas others are cynical, microwave-powered cash-ins. From my research, it's difficult to work out which side of the sourdough the Feathered Nest is buttered. That said, my research consisted of asking friends who live nearby (they liked it, but then again they also recommended *Emily in Paris*) and skimming its online presence. Based on its website, the Feathered Nest certainly seems exceptionally sure of itself. It boasts a five-star Telegraph review, even though the only one I can find gave it four, and what you would have to describe as an ambitiously priced menu — £29 for asparagus, anyone?

We arrive in the tiny and expensively formed Cotswolds village of Nether Westcote, which is also how the well-heeled, clip-vowelled locals pronounce "another waistcoat". I'm proud to note that ours is one of the only vehicles in the car park without a vanity plate. We're shown on to the heatwave-appropriate terrace alongside various B333 CKYs and D4 VEYs and nine billion wasps, where all eyes are on the sun-scorched but stunning Evenlode Valley. There can't be many restaurants in the country with a better view, and I briefly wonder if this is the real deal.

Briefly. The rustic charm doesn't quite reach our terrace: the wipe-clean faux rattan chairs and sturdy wooden tables suggest the end-of-season sale at B&Q. My martini is of an extremely high quantity — enough to drown an enemy — but room temperature and tasting of a mixture of petrol station vodka and petrol station petrol. When my taste buds cry foul after a couple of sips, I order a very decent viognier from the well-stocked wine list.

The menu is a mixture of crowd-pleasers and cautious ambition — think ox tongue and roasted wood pigeon. I go for a summer salad, a full greengrocer's scoop of green beans, with almond fingernails and apricots, on a thick puddle of smooth salsa verde. It's all fairly salty, reducing the apricots' function to texture rather than sweetness, and a job lot of mint threatens to overpower proceedings. My husband J's Pekin duck turns out not to be a typo — I was expecting a glistening Chinatown spit roast — rather a pretty-looking vanilla slice of terrine served between crackers and dotted with fruity splodges. It is a significantly better choice than mine and disappears in a fifth of the time. And then a wasp goes for a swim in my martini and instantly dies.

On to mains. The asparagus is off, presumably spending its fortune on a personalised number plate (AS94 RGS?), so I elect for its beetroot sub. It arrives in three great slabs, as if someone's knocked over a Stonehenge trilithon, and is overcooked, its texture not far off the accompanying sheep's milk curd. The rest of the chorus is comprised of a limp endive, which does little to gussy things up, and some slices of elderly jalapeño that make me slightly

JAMIE LAU FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE. PORTRAIT: CHARLIE CLIFT

My room temperature martini is a mixture of petrol station vodka and petrol station petrol

wish I'd gone to Chiquito. The blood-red beetroot and walnut vinaigrette gives the plate a CSI: Cotswolds vibe and only serves to accentuate the silty earthiness of the whole thing.

J's côte de boeuf is good, if slightly unrendered — making me doubly irritated that he'd ordered two better courses on the trot — and its café au lait sauce creamy, piquant and plentiful. But it arrives with wrinkled roast potatoes that look as if they've spent rather too much time in the bath, and a charred Roscoff onion that has definitely spent too much time under a heat source. Its side salad has an unannounced fennel-frond infestation, making the whole bowl taste like a bag of liquorice allsorts, and gives J the kind of conniptions you'd normally only find round these parts if a second-homer has announced they are converting their thatched cottage into a twenty-storey fetish emporium.

As the sun dips behind the hills, the wasps do what the locals dream of doing to Londoners and chase us away — well, inside — for dessert. Beautiful ancient oak beams shake their timbers sadly at the brand-new panelling and floor. With the exception of the entirely fox-based artwork (available for £1,200 apiece, or two plates of asparagus), and Buckaroo!-themed bar-stools topped with leather saddles, the place feels like a chain: the once-rough edges too smooth, the interior too polite. We could be anywhere, a symptom of the various overspruced village pubs cropping up across the countryside no longer trying to outdo each other and settling for imitation.

The dessert menu is reassuringly simple. Of the four options I plump for the choux bun in the hope it will turn my night around. It tastes like a Yorkshire pudding located at the bottom of your oven two Wednesdays after your last roast dinner. It is stuffed with clotted cream ice cream and succulent strawberries, and its puddle of lemony, elderflowery custard is inventive and tasty, but none of this is enough to salvage the main act. J's chocolate mousse cake (other rejected options: lemon verbena crème caramel — sounds a bit too much like handwash; baked Alaska — if you can't get a side salad right I'm not trusting you with this) is neither sweet enough to be indulgent nor bitter enough to be interesting. It comes with a snappy and successful A4-sized tuile studded with cocoa nibs, and a mint ice cream — presumably from the same wholesaler who has sabotaged my salad. It gives me flashbacks to the time as a student when I decided to find out what Original Source shower gel tasted like.

From top: Pekin duck terrine with rhubarb and hazelnuts; summer salad with apricots

The Feathered Nest is developing a good reputation locally, and the chef James Erasmus's CV, including the redoubtable Ledbury, is more than up to snuff. But other than the bar-stools and the puzzling, jaunty calypso music blasting out of the speakers, this is a dinner with few surprises and too many letdowns. In the end it feels like a slight case of misplaced confidence — a kitchen with grand ambitions often stumbling over the basics, with every competent flourish cancelled out by a bizarre misstep. I shouldn't really have had to type the word "but" quite so many times in a review, but… until these issues are ironed out, and while the ghost of Dick Turpin is employed as this coaching inn's financial adviser, I'm obliged to judge it according to its price point. It's neither terrible nor amazing, but does itself no favours by feathering its own nest, and reminds me what can be lost when a rural pub decides to cater for the Fulham crowd without quite delivering what they expect.

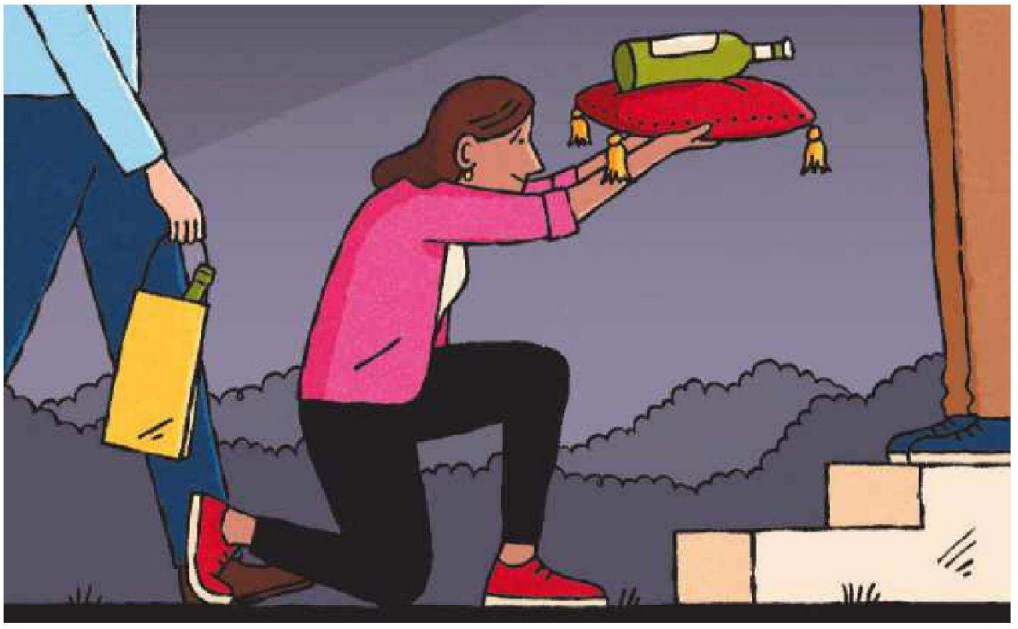
Overall, a three-star evening out, although no doubt it'll go up on its website as the full five stars ■

Nether Westcote, Oxfordshire OX7 6SD; thefeatherednestinn.co.uk; £140 a head, with drinks

THE DRINKS CABINET

Will Lyons

How to bring a bottle and get invited back



One scene in the Willy Russell play *Educating Rita* brilliantly encapsulates the insecurities we all feel when standing on a doorstep, bottle in hand, waiting for our hosts to open the door. Rita, a working-class hairdresser (played in the film by Julie Walters), is invited by her tutor, Dr Frank Bryant (Michael Caine), to a dinner he's hosting. Peering through the windows, terrified she hasn't brought the right wine, Rita loses her nerve and heads home. "It wouldn't have mattered if you'd walked in with a bottle of Spanish plonk," Bryant says the next morning. "It *was* Spanish," Rita mutters under her breath.

We've all wondered: have I spent too little or too much? Will they treat this as a gift or open it? What if it doesn't match the food? Why on earth did I buy it at Aldi instead of M&S? The good news is that bringing the right wine to dinner is far easier than most of us imagine. Just follow these simple rules.

Do… think of your host
The wine should delight them; don't turn up with a style that you like but they don't. For someone who's keen on rosé, you could splash out on a Domaine Tempier from Bandol. If your friends holiday in Portugal, try one of its fine wines, perhaps from the Dão. Or track down something esoteric such as a Greek xinomavro.

If your friends are hosting a barbecue, bring a bold and fruity wine to stand up to the fat and smoke of the grill. Argentinian malbec is ideal, as is pinotage from South Africa, Californian zinfandel or Aussie shiraz. If it's seafood and veg on the coals, try a Provençal rosé such as Minuty or a bottle of English sparkling rosé or blanc de noirs — perfect for outdoor sipping.

Do… remember that sparkling wine never fails
I've yet to meet anyone who doesn't like a vintage champagne or a top-notch English fizz. A grande marque such as Pol Roger or Bollinger always goes down well, as does a prestige cuvée — maybe Dom Pérignon. Less pricey alternatives might be a well-chosen crémant, a small-batch champagne such as Egly-Ouriet or the Tasmanian fizz Arras.

Once you hand over the bottle, it becomes a gift. Your host is under no obligation to serve it

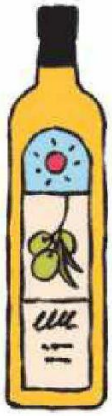
Do… stick to the classics
If in doubt, everyone appreciates a good chablis or a red bordeaux from a decent vintage. M&S has a reliable classics range.

Don't… expect the bottle to be opened
You've been invited to the home of someone who's gone to the effort of preparing a meal and gathering an assortment of entertaining guests. Once you hand over the bottle, it becomes a gift. Your host is under no obligation to serve it and under no circumstances should you insist. If they want to add it to their cellar, leave it in the fridge for next week or pour it for their in-laws, that is their prerogative.

Do… implement the three-bottle rule
To gently steer your host towards serving good-quality wine , try my three-bottle rule. The first is a gift; you might politely suggest the second bottle could be enjoyed that evening (if it's white, bring it chilled). The third is something special from your own collection and should be opened, with the cork jammed back in. Explain that other bottles in the case were corked, so you needed to taste it.

Don't... go cheap
Brits love sniffing out wines that punch above their price tag. But there is a limit. At a posh picnic once, a fellow guest tried to disguise a rather ordinary bordeaux from a discount store by bringing it in a crystal decanter. They were taken aback when I guessed the price. If you can afford it, £20 is about right to spend on a bottle. If you take two, I wouldn't drop below £15.

Do... go big
A magnum (two bottles) or a jeroboam (four) is a great idea for celebrations and certain to raise a smile. Champagne is the ideal choice as it ages better in a larger bottle, but rosé is fun too. In the depths of winter, seek out an aged red — a rioja or a bordeaux.



Do... bring a sweet wine
We all love sweet wine yet few of us buy it. Arriving with an amber-coloured dessert wine — sauternes from Bordeaux, tokaji from Hungary, Canadian icewine or perhaps a muscat from California or Australia — makes a welcome surprise. Ideally your host will chill it and serve it with pudding.

Don't... feel you have to take wine at all
If your host has a well-stocked cellar, a bottle of olive oil is a wonderful alternative (and far from the cheap option these days). Many wineries, such as Tenuta San Guido in Tuscany and the Symington estates in the Douro Valley, produce their own oil. And unlike flowers or chocolates, it will last.

Don't... regift
That expensive-looking bottle that's been in the cupboard for yonks? Leave it there. I know some people who took the very same bottle their hosts had given them six months earlier (the regiftees saw the funny side and gave it back on the next occasion). The wine you bring should be a talking point, something thoughtful and chosen with care, not hastily grabbed from the rack ■

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHAEL PARKIN. JASON ALDEN. VICKI COUCHMAN

Pete Brown

I like them apples: new ciders to try

Cider is the most misunderstood drink in Britain. Generations grew up with it as a cheap, sweet alternative to beer and today you'll see pubs selling "fruit ciders", as if an apple were not already a fruit. Otherwise it's written off as a plastic flagon of cloudy scrumpy straight from the farm — loopy juice that will put you on your back after a pint or two.

But now, and not before time, cider is being reinvented. Not by the big market-dominating corporations, but by smaller and often newer producers interested in improving diversity and quality.

The main way they're doing this is by leaning into different apple varieties. Just as with grapes, character varies widely, as does the effect of different terroirs. If you planted the pips from an apple somewhere new, the fruit that grew would not be the same as the apple you ate or drank. The only way to reproduce them exactly is to graft branches from the tree you want onto new root stock.

Many varieties are discovered as wildings, which grow from seeds that take root at random. At this time of year hedgerows by motorways are full of the fruit of cores thrown from windows in previous years. Some may be the star varieties of tomorrow.

Making great cider is sometimes down to the mastery of one variety, such as dabinett or kingston black. More often it's about the skilful blending of different varieties, understanding how their characteristics complement each other. Somerset cider makers tend to stick to bittersweet cider apples; in Kent they often use sweeter eating apples too.

Then there's the role of yeast. Some producers use a clean champagne yeast, to allow the fruit to shine through. Others rely on wild yeasts in their local environments, which bring their own funky flavours. Throw in a bit of ageing in oak barrels and you have yet another layer of flavour.

Here are six ciders (well, five and a perry) that are new to me, and mostly new full stop. Drink them not in pints, but from stemmed glasses, for an experience that's a world away from the park bench of your teens ■

Kicking Goat Dry Craft Cider (4.8%) kickinggoatcider.co.uk, 12x500ml, £38 Kicking Goat intriguingly takes apples from orchards in Somerset and Kent — but this crisp, slightly oaky cider is all Somerset fruit.

Kent Cider Company Waken (4.2%) kentcider.co.uk, 12x330ml, £44 A strong, clear cider has been blended with fresh, cloudy apple juice to make a medium-sweet quencher that's cloudy, still and not too strong.

Sandford Orchards Katja (6.8%) sandfordorchards.co.uk, 12x500ml, £42.60 Using a dessert apple with light fruit aromas, this cider positions itself as a lower-ABV alternative to prosecco; it works for me. Serve in flutes.

The Newt Dabinett (5.1%) thenewtinsomerset.com, 750ml, £12.95 Once wild, dabinett apples are now synonymous with Somerset cider. This single-variety dabinett is rich, fruity and oaky, but still crisp.

Showerings Triple Vintage (6.8%) Waitrose, 375ml, £3.50 From the family who gave us Babycham, this new release offers the elegance it aspired to. A blend of three vintages from one orchard, it's meant to rival fine wine.

Oliver's Eskimo Eyes Fine Perry (6%) oliversciderandperry.co.uk, 750ml, £11 This is an oaky, citrussy, tropical triumph from the world's best perry maker: pears fermented with wild yeasts and aged in wine and rum barrels.

HEALTH

What's the healthiest fruit?

Britain's bestsellers ranked, by *Katy Salter*

If an apple a day keeps the doctor away, we should be a nation in robust health: Britain's fruit bowls are overflowing with them. They're not our bestselling fruit, though — bananas remain top banana, with apples in fourth, grapes third and strawberries second — a shocker for anyone who still thinks of them as a summer-only treat. Yet while British shoppers are good at chucking plenty of fruit into their baskets, only one in three adults actually manage to eat their five-a-day.

Of course, no single fruit is a silver bullet for good health. But some fruits pack bigger benefits than others, so we asked Tesco, the UK's biggest supermarket, for its ten bestselling fresh fruits. We rated them for vitamins and minerals, antioxidants, fibre and gut health benefits, as well as how they affect our dental health. How does your favourite do?

1 Strawberries

Our second bestselling fruit comes out top of the crops for all-round health benefits. Strawberries have more vitamin C per 100g than an orange, and seven or eight contain your entire recommended daily allowance (RDA). Vitamin C helps to support immune function and the formation of collagen, which we need for robust joints and skin elasticity, says the registered dietitian Nichola Ludlam-Raine. Strawberries are also a good source of fibre, folate (a B vitamin that helps form healthy red blood cells) and manganese (important for metabolism). They contain ellagic acid, a potent antioxidant that lab studies indicate has anti-inflammatory properties and may help prevent certain cancers. Their natural sweetness makes them popular even with the fussiest young eaters (in the US, parents buy so many they're "going broke on berries", says The Washington Post) — and although the sugars in a berry count towards your total intake, you would have to eat almost 2kg to hit the recommended daily limit of 90g. Whether a hard January import can match a homegrown summer berry for flavour is a different question.

2 Raspberries

You might curse the seeds that get stuck in your teeth, but they account for a lot of the fibre raspberries contain — about 5-6g in an 80g serving, more than a bowl of Weetabix and 20 per cent of your RDA. They also contain polyphenols called ellagitannins, which feed the good bacteria in your gut, where they are metabolised into urolithins, "compounds that provide antioxidant and anti-inflammatory health benefits", says Kaitlin Colucci, a gut health dietitian. Raspberries are also a decent source of vitamin C, manganese and magnesium — the last two are good for your metabolism and magnesium helps with sleep.

3 Blueberries

As Violet Beauregarde may well have found out, blueberries give you "the most bang for your buck" in terms of antioxidants, Ludlam-Raine says. They are crammed with polyphenol antioxidants, particularly anthocyanins, which give blueberries their colour and are linked to a reduced risk of dementia, heart disease and some cancers. Like other berries, blueberries also contain manganese (good for bone health), vitamin C, vitamin K (for heart health) and fibre (about half that of raspberries). "Cooking them may reduce the vitamin C but many polyphenols remain, so they are a nutritious addition to porridge," Ludlam-Raine says.

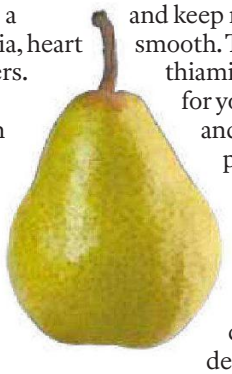
4 Apples

It's not just the doctor — they could also get the dentist off your case. Apples are great for oral health, says Karen Coates of the charitable Oral Health Foundation. "Biting into an apple stimulates saliva production, which is how our bodies defend teeth from damage, and that biting action disrupts the debris and plaque," she says.

The registered dietitian Bini Suresh points to other bonuses: "They're affordable, readily available and store well, retaining their nutrients." These are concentrated in the peel and include quercetin (linked to reduced cholesterol and improved blood pressure) and gut-friendly pectin, although those with IBS or fructose sensitivity may find that apples make bloating worse. Baking or stewing can make apples more digestible, but you'll lose some of the vitamin C.

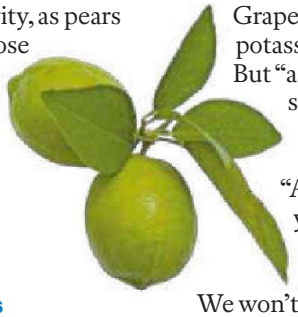
5 Bananas

They don't just give Bananaman superpowers — our favourite fruit is "nutrient-rich and convenient, providing fibre and energy", Suresh says. The greener, less ripe ones have the most resistant starch, a carb that's good for your gut. Bananas also contain potassium, which helps to control your blood pressure and keep muscle movements smooth. They're rich in thiamin (vitamin B1), good for your nervous system, and vitamin B6, for processing energy from food. One word of caution: "Because they're starchy, bananas can stick to your teeth and contribute to dental decay," Coates says. To counteract this, she recommends drinking water after eating any fruit.



6 Pears

Infuriatingly quick to ripen just when you aren't looking, pears are higher in fibre than most people realise, Suresh says. A medium pear gives you 5-6g of fibre, about 20 per cent of your RDA. Pears contain soluble and insoluble fibre — our guts need both — but also eat the skin to get the full benefit. As with apples, go carefully if you have IBS or fructose sensitivity, as pears are high in fructose and sorbitol, which can cause bloating. They also contain potassium and vitamin C.



7 Mandarins

The name is used to mean any small, sweet, orange-like fruit including satsumas, clementines and whatever retailers like to call "easy peelers". Whichever you prefer, they all give you a dose of vitamin C — about 50-75 per cent of your RDA — as well as folate for energy and heart health, and potassium. They're hydrating too. Much of the fibre is in the pith, so don't peel it all off too assiduously. Remember that while vitamin C is good for overall oral health, mandarins, like all citrus fruit, are acidic and can soften tooth enamel — so wait an hour after eating before you brush your teeth.

8 Oranges

The poster child for vitamin C, an orange contains about 70mg, easily surpassing the UK RDA (you wee out what you don't need). They're also a source of fibre, folate, potassium and the antioxidant hesperidin, which is important for heart health and circulation. So why don't they rank higher? Because many of us buy oranges for juicing. "A whole orange retains the fibre and is more filling," Ludlam-Raine says. Without most of the fibre, the orange's natural sugars get into the bloodstream more quickly, leading to a bigger blood sugar spike — one reason that fruit juice counts as only one of your five-a-day, and why the NHS recommends having no more than 150ml fruit juice daily.

9 Grapes

Red and black grapes are a good source of antioxidant anthocyanins, but green grapes don't have them. The darker fruits also have higher levels of resveratrol, which studies suggest may slow cognitive decline and lower blood pressure. Both are concentrated in the skin. Grapes provide hydration, potassium and some fibre. But "as they are small and sweet, it can be easy to overeat them," Ludlam-Raine says. "A sensible amount if you're watching your sugar intake is 80g, or about 10-12 grapes." We won't tell you wine is healthy, but yes, it does retain some polyphenol antioxidants.

10 Lemons and limes

Lemons would make the No 10 spot on their own (they outsell limes two to one), but as they are nutritionally similar and Tesco counts their sales together, you get a Bogof deal here. Both contain vitamin C, fibre and antioxidants. But since few of us eat them whole, the benefits are reduced. Try squeezing them onto iron-rich veg and pulses such as spinach and lentils: the vitamin C helps your body absorb the iron better. A slice of either will improve your G&T — in flavour if not virtue ■

GETTY IMAGES

Did a c-section ruin my fertility?

Pregnancy came easily for *Cathy Adams* — but not second time around

The morning my son was born, my husband and I drove the mile from our house to King's College Hospital, London. The roads were blessedly empty (bar the queue for Sainsbury's, this being March 2020 and the loo-roll-hoarding stage of the pandemic).

I was 40 weeks pregnant, and 12 days into various attempts at induction. Hormonal pessaries and cervical sweeps had had zero effect, so I'd been given the choice between a Foley balloon, a device that would inflate to mechanically dilate my cervix — no thanks — or a planned, "semi-elective" c-section.

The latter, I was told, was the sensible option — since I'd not dilated even a centimetre, the balloon was likely to result in emergency surgery, after a long and painful labour. Again, no thanks. I chose the sunroof, thinking I'd taken the easy option. How I've come to question that snap decision.

"Secondary infertility" is the term used when you can't conceive after a first healthy pregnancy. My husband and I began trying for another baby when our son was still in nappies, expecting it to be as easy as it was first time round. When it wasn't, we decided to try IVF — a painful, expensive world that has now consumed us for more than four years of our lives. Six rounds on — a constant rollercoaster of hope and disappointment — our son still has no sibling. There's one thing our IVF doctors have told us, again and again: caesarean sections can reduce women's fertility. According to a large-scale study published in March in the American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology, a c-section gives you an 11 per cent reduced likelihood of having another baby.

C-sections are now the most common means of birth in the UK, according to the latest NHS figures. Of 542,235 babies born in England in the 12 months to March 31, 2025, 45 per cent were delivered by caesarean (20 per cent elective, 25 per cent emergency); 44 per cent were unassisted vaginal births; 11 per cent of babies were helped out with forceps or a ventouse. A decade earlier, 26.5 per cent of births were c-sections.

Factors contributing to the rise include higher rates of obesity and diabetes, and women having babies older, which can make a c-section more likely as age increases the risk of issues such as gestational diabetes. For thousands of women, c-sections have meant the safe arrival of their children.

Women are warned of myriad risks before they choose to have the procedure — blood clots, organ damage, uterine rupture — but the official Nice guidelines do not mention an impact on future fertility, which to me now seems outrageous. I was cautioned only to try to wait 18 months before having another child, to give my uterine wall time to recover. What no one mentioned was that the c-section could cause a defect in my womb that might bring about secondary infertility.

Two years ago, after more than two years of trying to conceive naturally and via IVF, I was desperate for answers. At fertility scans doctors had seen fluid in my uterus, reminding me it wasn't usually a problem. But on an internet-informed hunch I got myself a referral for an MRI scan, which confirmed that a pouch had formed under the c-section scar in my womb — a niche, or isthmocele.

Niches are typically small and symptomless, I learnt later, and while the premenstrual

Cathy Adams, pregnant and with her baby son in 2020. Opposite: Adams and her son at the family home in London

Women are warned of myriad risks before a caesarean, but not the impact on future fertility

spotting I'd had is a telltale sign, most women only realise they have one if they can't get pregnant again or repeatedly miscarry. Niches can collect fluid — blood, cervical mucus — that, it's widely accepted, can be toxic for an embryo or hinder implantation.

A niche doesn't mean the c-section has been done badly. "It can happen as a result of wound-healing problems after the procedure," says Dr Harish Bhandari, a consultant gynaecologist and the founder of the IVF clinic Jiva Fertility, in Leeds. The prevalence of niches developing after a c-section is between 42 and 84 per cent according to a recent overview of studies in AOGS, a Nordic gynaecology journal.

Dr Ippokratis Sarris is a consultant in reproductive medicine and the director of King's Fertility in Camberwell, south London, where I'm having treatment. Referring to a 2025 study published in the Annals of Medicine, he says a large niche, at least 5mm deep, can reduce your chance of having another baby by about 30 per cent.

My niche, according to the MRI, was 5mm. It was a relief, of sorts, to have a diagnosis. But at the time my IVF doctors gave me little information, so after months reading obscure Reddit threads, I turned to Dr Nitish Narvekar at King's College Hospitalfor private surgical advice.

He has studied niches in the context of fertility treatment and says he has noticed they correlate with "a drop-off in terms of embryo implantation".

When my third round of IVF failed early last year, I decided to go ahead with experimental niche-correction surgery: a three-hour operation in which Narvekar would cut out the offending pouch and stitch my uterus back together. It left me feeling much as I did after the c-section; I couldn't get out of bed for a couple of days afterwards and felt woozy from the painkillers for a week. I no longer have pre-period spotting and scans show a small, neat scar and minimal fluid.

COURTESY OF CATHY ADAMS. JOONEY WOODWARD FOR THE TIMES

I don't necessarily regret the c-section itself — it meant my son and I both survived his birth

Data on the impact of surgical niche correction on fertility is scarce, although a 2023 study from the Netherlands looked at 133 women who had corrective surgery on uterine defects between 2011 and 2019 and found the outcomes "promising" if not conclusive.

One thing is for certain: Narvekar is performing this surgery with increasing frequency. Over the past two years he has done one niche correction a month, double the rate of the previous two years. Sarris, of King's Fertility, agrees niches are "more and more apparent", in line with the rising numbers of UK c-sections, and says fertility doctors have now begun diagnosing them as a problem. Research into uterine niche correction is regarded by specialists as a "trending" area.

My surgery has not been a magic bullet. Our fourth, fifth and sixth embryos, transferred after the operation, all failed. The latter two were genetically screened, so we knew that they were healthy. Since the operation I have seen half a dozen specialist fertility doctors and none has been able to tell me why the IVF isn't working now; most agree something in my uterus is still restricting implantation. I'm 39, so my age could be a factor. It could just be bad luck.

I don't necessarily regret the c-section itself — it meant my son and I both survived his birth, after all. But I do wonder what might have been different had I known of the potential consequences. Perhaps I'd have gone ahead but consulted fertility specialists sooner.

Secondary infertility has been devastating for me and my husband, particularly as friends and family have had second children with ease. There is always more hope with more rounds of IVF, although after four years of trying there may be more power in stopping ■

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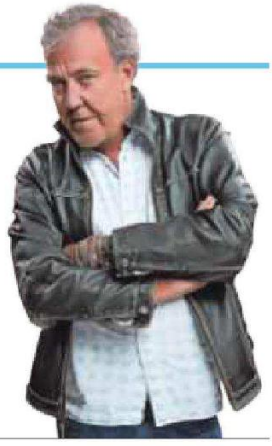


REVIEW BENTLEY CONTINENTAL

It turns out that I've still got it. My arteries may be stiff and my liver fatty but the mind is still sharp and the knack of working out what's what with a car is still there. Which is why, after just a few miles in the new electric Nissan Micra, I thought to myself, "Hang on. This feels awfully similar to the electric Renault 5 that I tested last summer."

When I got home I did some digging and found the seat of my pants had been right. They may not look the same, but under the skin they're identical. Same price, same propulsion system, same basic architecture, same windows even.

And that raised a question. Who is going to look at the extremely snazzy Renault 5, which is very cool, and think, "Yes, I want that exact car but I'd rather it looked more boring and had a Nissan badge"? I've seen some strange tie-ups in the car industry over the years — such as the Lancia Thema and Saab 9000 — but I can't get my head round this one at all.

Certainly I can't be bothered to go on with the review. If you want to know what the Nissan is like, dig up my old review of the Renault and ignore the bits where I say it looks great.

And now let's move on to the new Bentley Continental GT S, which is heavier and more annoying than its predecessor, but also better.

The predecessor in question was the Continental with the W12 engine, a power plant I never really understood. I don't understand the appeal of any 12-cylinder engine, if I'm honest. They seem to add complexity and weight without providing much in the way of an upside. Smoothness? Well, yes, a 12-pot motor is going to be smoother than an inherently unbalanced V8, but if it's engineering silkiness you're after, a straight six is even better. And there's less to go wrong.

On top of all this, while the W12 that Bentley used was more compact than a V12, it wasn't inherently smooth. Which is why, when I bought a Flying Spur a few years back, I went for the V8.

Now, though, you no longer have the choice because the EU has decided that big engines produce too many carbon dioxides and that if you are going to fit one it should have some kind of electrical assistance. Basically, it should be a glorified Toyota Prius. Which is why the W12 has gone and the GT S is now a V8 hybrid.

I didn't used to mind powerful hybrids when they first came along. I actually thought the McLaren P1 was fantastic, if a little unhinged. But now they annoy me for the exact same reason that V12s did. They're too heavy and too complicated and there's a lot to go wrong.

As a place to sit it's unbeatable. And if it had a kitchen and a lavatory, I'd be happy to live in it

Yes, the hybrid V8 fitted to the Continental GT S — and the Porsche Panamera, incidentally — is extremely powerful. You get 512 horsepowers from the engine and 188 from the electric motor. That's 671 in combination and 686 torques, meaning you can accelerate from 0-62mph in minus 300 years. And not stop accelerating until you hear a sonic boom. This is a very fast car.

But. The old W12 was a very fast car. The non-hybrid V8 was a very fast car. And they didn't weigh more than the moon, which is what the new GT S does. It tips the scales at nearly two and a half tonnes, which doesn't seem very CO_2 conscious to me. And also, because of all the batteries, the boot is now smaller.

I suppose, on the upside, you can charge up the batteries overnight so that in the morning you can creep off to work without waking the neighbours. And yes, you can do several hundred yards before the batteries are out of juice and the engine needs to fire itself up, but do I need that in my life? Not really, and not just because I don't have any neighbours.

Anyway, let's park all this eco EU nonsense, accept that's where we are these days and concentrate on what the GT S is like. Well, it looks fantastic, it comes in a range of colours that are magnificent and as a place to sit, I have to say, it's pretty much unbeatable. It's just so sumptuous and grown-up, and you really do have to admire the fact that there is styling and attention to detail and craftsmanship in even the tiniest details. No car firm does it better. If it had a kitchen and a lavatory, I'd be happy to live in there.

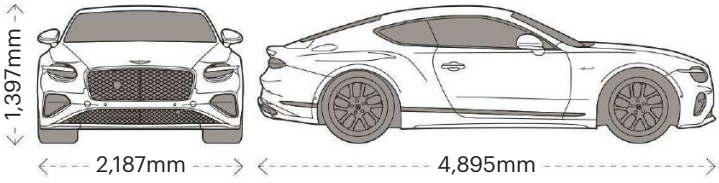
It has also done a pretty good job of making it easy to switch off all the EU safety nonsense that forces you to stick to the speed limit and look where you're going. Features that no one asked for and that add thousands to the price of every new car. This Bentley is £212,500. Without all the EU regulations on CO_2 and safety, and without all the taxes our government needs to pay for the nation's Pip enthusiasts, it would be £3.75.

So it's fast and it's a lovely place to be, but what about that enormous weight? Surely that makes its presence felt as you move about? Well, yes, you're never fooled into thinking it's a Lotus Elan; there's always a sense that you're going from place to place in the Palace of Versailles, but somehow that sort of adds to the fun. Thanks to four-wheel drive and four-wheel steering, and because the batteries mean there's now more weight at the back than there is at the front, this really is a car you can hustle. And that's amusing, barnstorming along in something that's so obviously heavier than most cargo ships. It also fits the Bentley ethos. Remember: Ettore Bugatti once described them as the fastest lorries in the world.

Of course, many would say that it's completely ridiculous in these days of meddling and socialism, but hang on a minute. Last week I had to go to Scotland, to Bridge of Weir, where the leather for the Bentley is produced, incidentally, and then over to Melrose to buy some cows.

I could have flown of course, but it's been a while since I did a road trip, so I nicked Lisa's Range Rover and used that. It was a 12-hour round trip and I must say the RR was sublimely comfortable. But if I had to do the trip again, and could take any car I liked, I'd use a Bentley GT S because I reckon it would be even better ■

The Clarksometer
Bentley Continental GT S



Engine 3996cc, V8, twin-turbo, petrol plus electric motor **Power** 671bhp (combined) **Torque** 686 lb ft (combined) **0-62mph** 3.5sec **Top speed** 191mph **Fuel** Up to 68.9mpg **CO_2** 93g/km **Weight** 2,459kg **Price** £212,500 **Release date** On sale now

Jeremy's rating ★★★★☆

ALAMY

CAR CLINIC

Our experts answer your questions

Q I've been fined for stopping in a yellow box junction. The penalty notice contained a still of my car, but that doesn't prove I'd stopped, which I don't believe I did. Can I see video from the camera before I accept the fine? Or do I pay to avoid escalating charges and try for a refund? CG, London

A Most yellow box junction fines in London are issued using CCTV evidence. The still on the penalty charge notice (PCN) rarely tells the full story. I recommend you request the CCTV footage before deciding whether to pay as it is the primary evidence.

Most councils offer a 50 per cent discount for early payment, but requesting the video does not automatically deprive you of that discount. London authorities generally place the case on hold while they arrange for you to view the footage.

If an appeal is rejected, they will usually reoffer the discounted penalty for a further period. However, this is a matter of policy, not a legal right. I would email the council when you request the footage, asking it to extend the discounted period until you have seen the CCTV. If your suspicions are correct, challenge the PCN. If you are wrong, pay at once ■

Nick Freeman, motoring lawyer aka Mr Loophole

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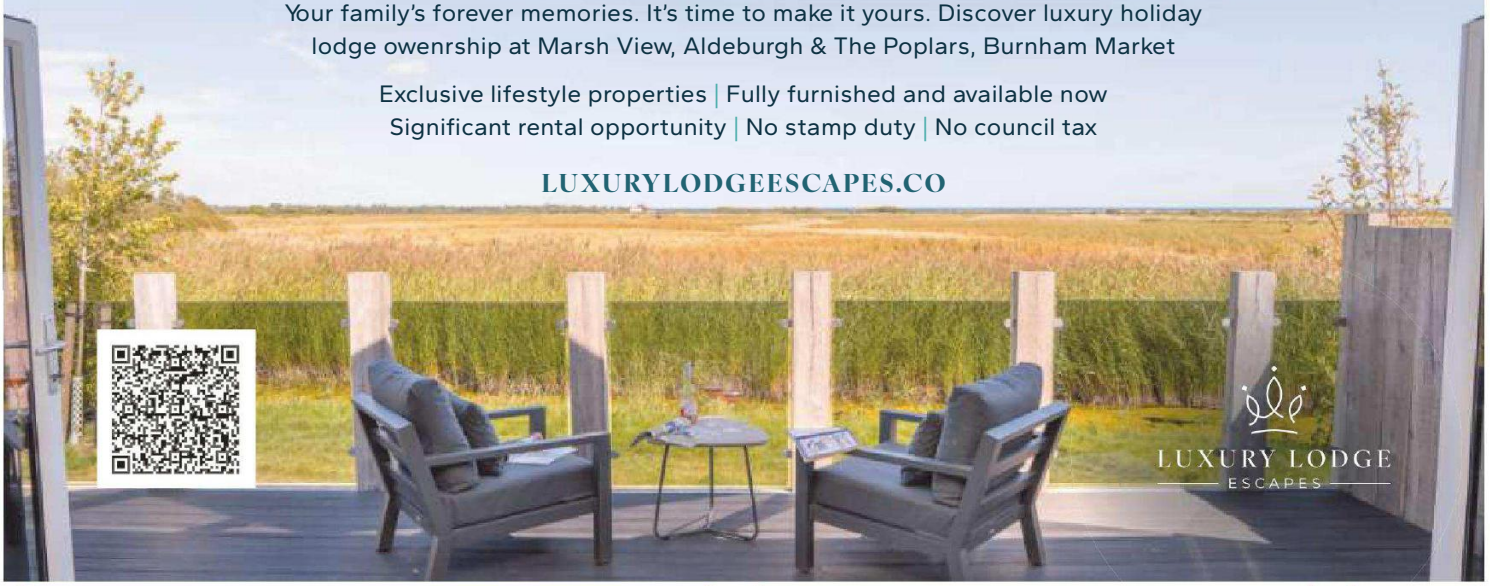

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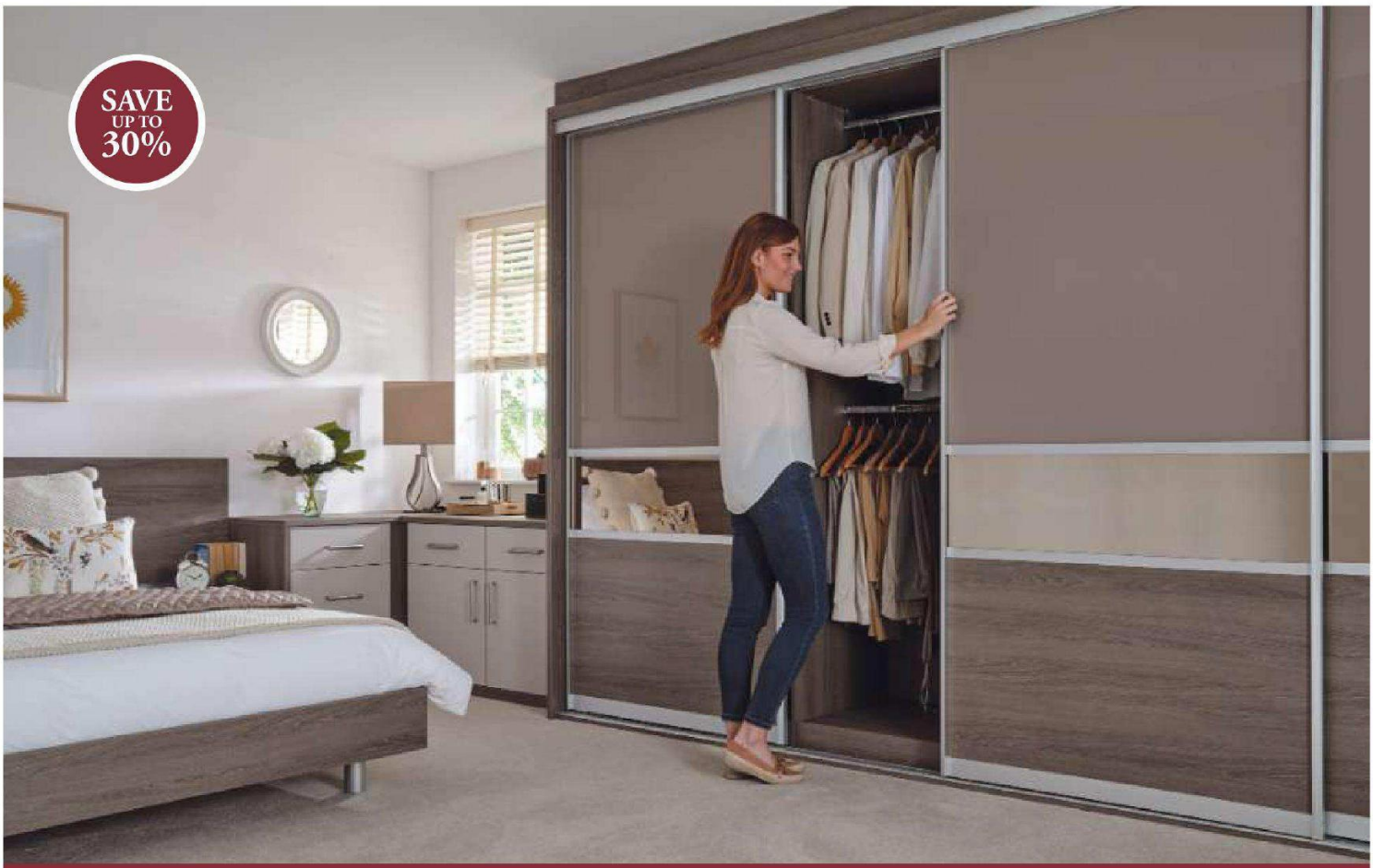

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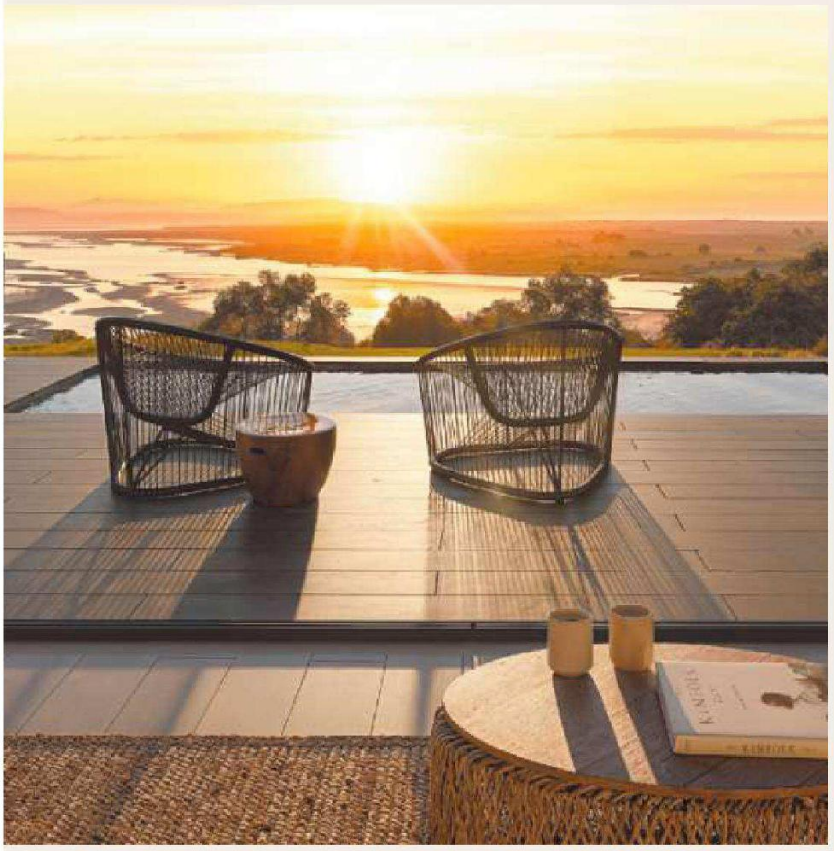

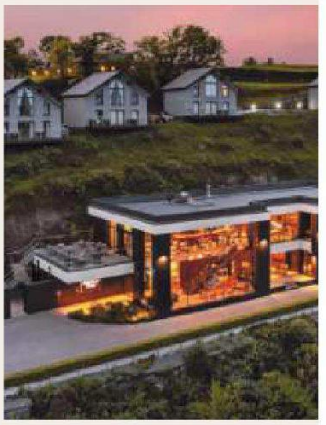

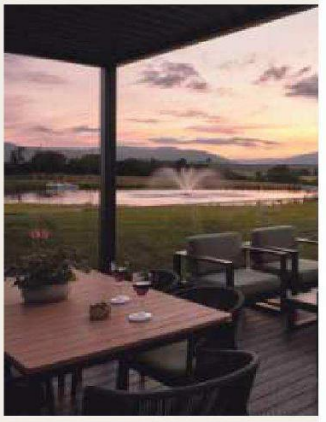

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A LIFE IN THE DAY

Melanie Brown

Spice Girl and campaigner, 51

Brown was born in Leeds, and after answering an advert in The Stage in 1994 became Scary Spice in the Spice Girls. In 1996 *Wannabe*, their debut single, reached No 1 in 37 countries, selling more than ten million copies. By the time the group disbanded in 2000 they had sold 100 million records. In 2022 she was awarded an MBE for services to charitable causes and vulnerable women. She has three children, Phoenix, 27, Angel, 19, and Madison, 14, from previous relationships. She lives near Leeds with Madison and her third husband, Rory McPhee.

DANNY LOWE

After 15 years living in LA I now wake up back in Yorkshire on my farm close to my mum's house in Leeds. Despite living all over the world my accent has always been strong and a reminder of where I'm from. Rory gets up before me, so he'll bring me a coffee. Then I'll meditate before feeding the animals. I've got ducks, chickens, goats and two massive protection rottweilers, who I walk around the 15-acre forest.

If I'm working, I'll do some emails and Zooms. If not, I'll use the spa we've just fitted out and I'll do an LED infrared sun shower for ten minutes, twenty minutes of a Himalayan salt sauna, then three minutes in a Brass Monkey outdoor ice bath.

My mum might then come over and help me with my latest obsession in the garden. The chickens have been digging up the plants, so I'm changing it into a rockery with old Yorkshire stone, and I've got an orchard with fruit trees.

I do get back to LA for work. I'll be going in August to film the live *America's Got Talent* shows, which I'm a judge on. But I live a peaceful life these days with family. I've just hung out with Phoenix, who was DJing at the SXSW London festival. Madison is super academic and wants to be a doctor or a lawyer, which will save me money on legal bills, and Angel is very artistic.

So far none of them have inherited my pop musical ability and they're more interested in what's for dinner than me being a Spice Girl. They call me vintage because my wardrobe is full of Nineties outfits, but they're surprised at how famous the Spice Girls were. Angel was in Japan last year and said, "Mum, they even know you here!" All the kids came to the 2019 reunion tour and I wanted them to come back again but they were all, like, "Oh God, we've already seen it twice."

Rory is a brilliant cook and will usually make lunch. He does an amazing roast, but most of the time I eat really cleanly: lots of soups, spelt and kimchi.

Rory runs his own hair salon and I do my thing, but we've got so much in common because we're both from Leeds. His family knows my family, he knew my dad before he died, and we share the same sense of good northern humour. We love watching stand-up together — like Lou Sanders, who is a friend — and we're both very much young at heart and very much in love, which I never thought would happen.

I know some people find doing nothing hard, but I've mastered it. I've always been quite a loner, and because when I'm working and performing I give so much, and I'm very high-energy — I have ADHD — I love just pottering about on the farm.

I'll always find time to keep advocating for abuse charities, which is what I got my MBE for. Still more than two women a week get killed by their current or former partner. Now there is help out there, but the justice system needs to catch up and have laws for survivors brave enough to speak out. Perpetrators are still getting off scot-free.

After Rory's cooked dinner I'll make sure the animals are all in their right places, so they don't get eaten by other animals, then I'll relax in front of the telly. Rory is in bed by 9.30, but I'm a night owl so I'll binge episodes of *Legends* or *Apex* before bed at midnight.

Before sleep, surrounded by my salt lamps, I listen to a non-sleep deep rest session. It talks me into a state of relaxation, from the top of me head to me tippy-toes, then I'm out ■

Interview by Nick McGrath. Brown has partnered with O2 to become the voice of Scroll Stopper, its callback service

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